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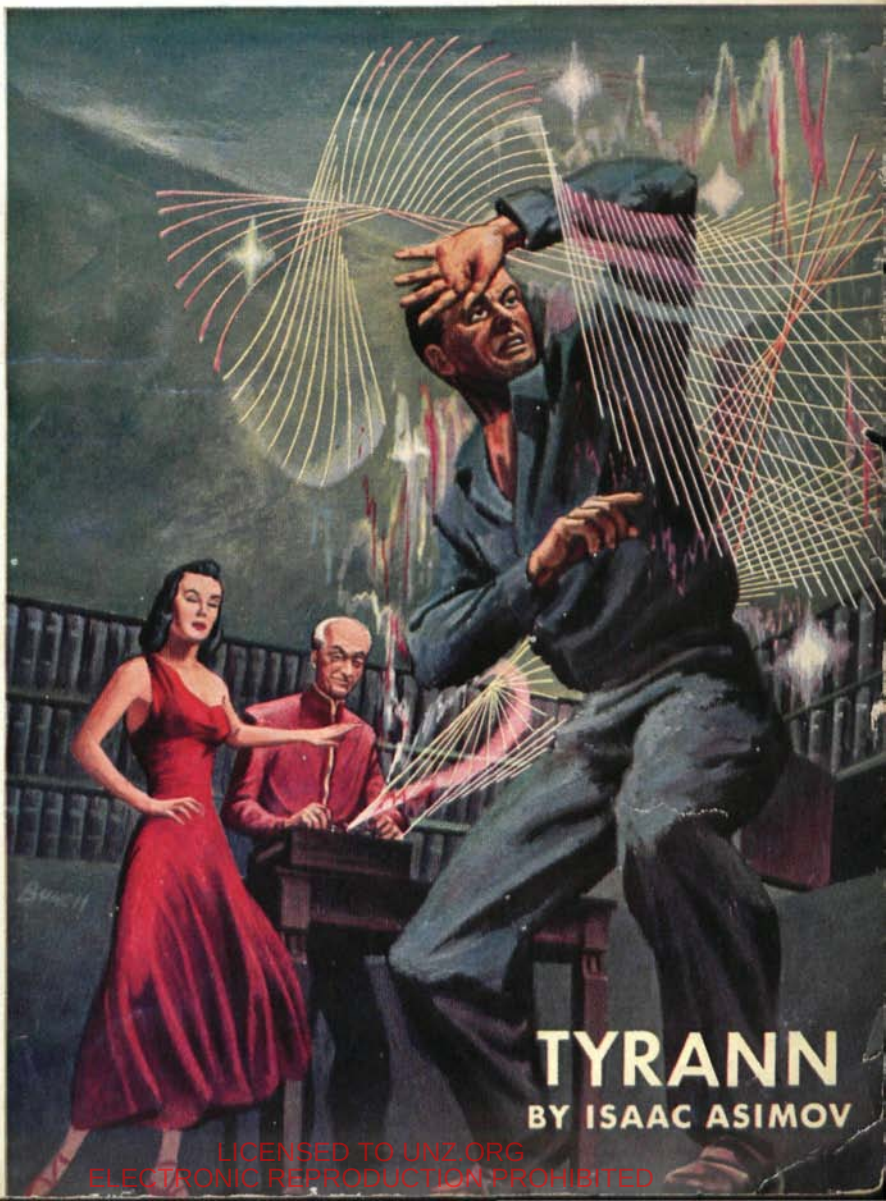

TYRANN
BY ISAAC ASIMOV

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Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

January, 1951 Vol. 1, No. 4

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Old Business and New

IN THIS issue, you can see the changes that you, the readers, have voted for:

● 50% more illustrations, and several new artists.

● Shorter book review.

● Article skipped this month, with others scheduled every other issue or so. General subjects, of course, in layman's terms.

○ A short editorial page, discussing matters related directly to GALAXY *Science Fiction.*

○ Next month's contents page in place of a formal forecast. I'd like to keep it in the same spot every issue, but that takes mechanical layout, and nobody is ever going to be able to accuse GALAXY of that.

○ Constant improvement. Several readers have commented that GALAXY *started* at a level that other magazines hope to *attain.* (Their italics, not mine.) But magazines, like civilizations, must advance or decline; there is no possibility of stasis.

This issue, for example, is better, in my opinion, than any of the previous three . . . better in editorial balance, art, and layout, a direct result of close and sympathetic collaboration between editor and reader.

The maintenance of this level is not easy, of course. Any number of usable stories come in that don't have the strong characterization, the human conflict, the psychological suspense that are coming to be identified with GALAXY *Science Fiction,* and must thus be rejected. Others have those qualities and not freshness of theme. The right blend was a rarity to begin with, but it is becoming less so as authors with integrity recognize the objective—stories with believable characters, human motivations against a background of shrewd speculation.

Appearing in GALAXY, in other words, is a distinction that authors are willing to work hard to achieve. The result is progressively better issues.

Next month, by way of proof, we have "The Fireman" by RAY BRADBURY, a 25,000 word story of immense impact—a hypnotic cover by CHESLEY BONESTELL—the second installment of "Tyrann" by ISAAC ASIMOV—short stories by FRITZ LEIBER, LESTER DEL REY and others.

After that? Well, GALAXY has kept improving, hasn't it?

—H. L. GOLD

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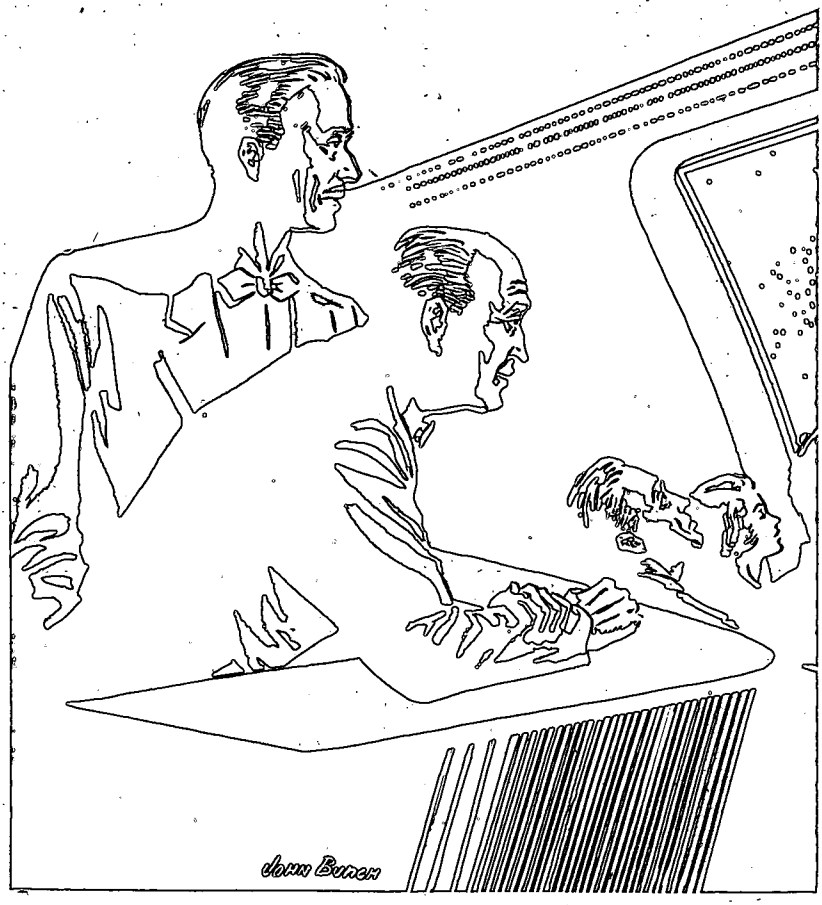
TYRANN

By ISAAC ASIMOV

Part 1 of a 3 part serial



Being young, handsome, son of the chief noble of a planet is a pleasant setup—if it doesn't turn out to be a death trap!

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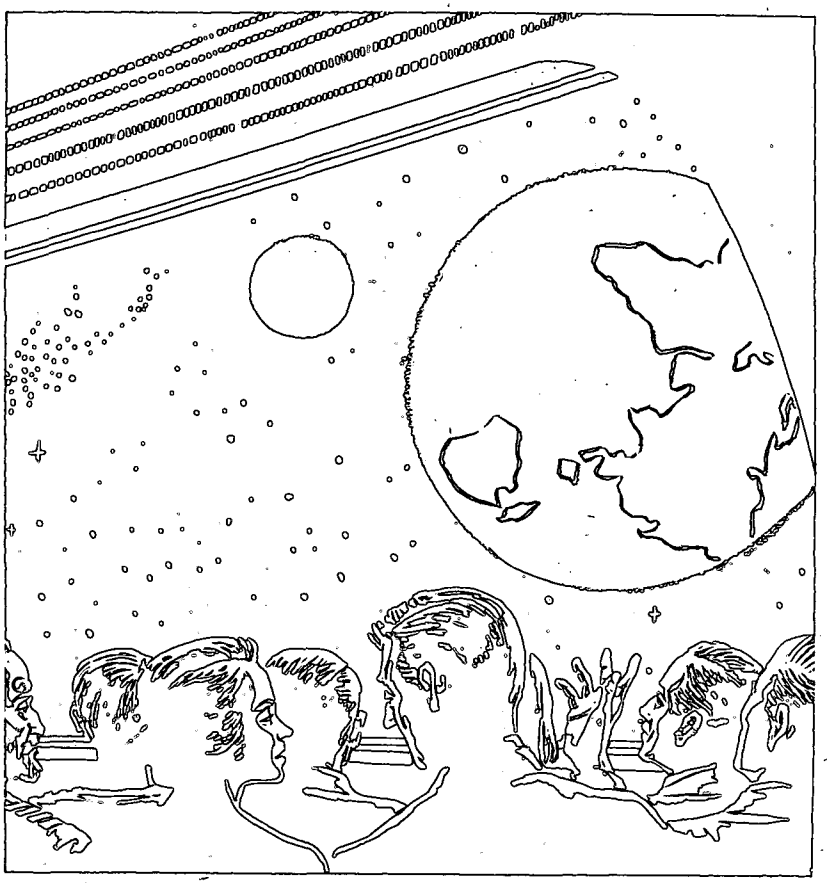

Illustrated by JOHN BUNCH

CHAPTER I

The Bedroom Murmured

THE bedroom murmured gently to itself. It was almost below the limits of hearing; an irregular little sound, yet quite unmistakable and deadly.

But it wasn't that which awakened Biron Farrill and dragged him out of a heavy, unrefreshing slumber. He turned his head restlessly from side to side in a futile struggle against the periodic *burr* on the end table.

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He put out a clumsy hand without opening his eyes and closed contact.

"Hello," he mumbled.

Sound tumbled instantly out of the receiver. It was harsh and loud, but Biron lacked the ambition to reduce the volume.

It said, "May I speak to Biron Farrill?"

Biron said, fuzzily, "Speaking. What do you want?"

"May I speak to Biron Farrill?" The voice was urgent.

Biron's eyes opened on the thick darkness. He became conscious of the dry unpleasantness of his tongue and the faint odor that remained in the room.

He said, "I'm Biron Farrill. Who is this?"

It went on, disregarding him, gathering tension, a loud voice in the night: "Is anyone there? I would like to speak to Biron Farrill."

Biron raised himself on one elbow and stared at the place where the visiphone sat. He jabbed at the vision control and the small screen was alive with light.

"Here I am," he said. He recognized the smooth, slightly asymmetric features of Sander Jonti. "Call me in the morning, Jonti."

He started to turn the instrument off, when Jonti said, "Hello. Hello. Is anyone there? Is this University Hall, room 526? Hello."

Biron was suddenly aware that the tiny pilot-light which would have indicated a live sending-circuit was not on. He swore under his breath and pushed the switch. It stayed off. Then Jonti gave up, and the screen went blank, and was merely a small square of featureless light.

Biron turned it off. He hunched his shoulder and tried to burrow into the pillow again. He was annoyed. In the first place, no one had the right to yell at him in the middle of the night. He looked quickly at the gently luminous figures just over the headboard. Three-fifteen. House lights would not go on for nearly four hours.

Besides, he didn't like having to wake to the complete darkness of his room. Four years' custom had not hardened him to the Earthman's habit of building structures of reinforced concrete, squat, thick, and windowless. It was a many-thousand-year-old tradition dating from the days when the primitive nuclear bomb had not yet been countered by the Forcefield defense.

But that was all in the past. Atomic warfare had done its worst to Earth. Most of it was hopelessly radioactive and useless. There was nothing left to lose, and yet architecture mirrored the old fears, so that when Biron woke, it was to pure darkness.

BIRON rose on his elbow again. That was strange. He waited. It wasn't the fatal murmur of the

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bedroom he had become aware of. It was something perhaps even less noticeable and less deadly..

He missed the gentle movement of air that one took so for granted, that trace of continuous renewal. He tried to swallow easily and failed. The atmosphere seemed to become oppressive even as he realized the situation. The ventilating system had stopped working, and now he really had a grievance. He couldn't even use the visiphone to report the matter.

He tried again to make sure. The milky square of light sprung out and threw a faint, pearly luster on the bed. It was receiving, but it wouldn't send. Well, it wasn't important. Nothing would be done about it before day, anyway.

He yawned and groped for his slippers, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. No ventilation, eh? That would account for the queer smell. He frowned and sniffed sharply two or three times. No use. It was familiar, but he couldn't place it.

He made his way to the bathroom, reached automatically for the light switch, although he didn't really need it to draw himself a glass of water. It closed uselessly. He tried it several times, peevishly. Wasn't *anything* working? He shrugged, drank in the dark, and felt better. He yawned again on his way back to the bedroom where he tried the main switch. All the lights were out.

Biron sat on the bed, placed his large hands on his hard-muscled thighs and considered. Ordinarily, a thing like this would call for a nasty discussion with the service staff. No one expected hotel service in a college dormitory, but, by Space, there were certain minimum standards of efficiency one could demand. Not that it was of vital importance just now. Graduation was coming and he was through. In three days, he'd be saying a last good-by to the room and to the University of Earth; to Earth itself.

Still, he might report it anyway, without particular comment. He could go out and use the hall phone. They might bring in a self-powered light or even rig up a fan so he could sleep without psychosomatic choking sensations. If not, to Space with them. Two more nights.

IN THE light of the visiphone, he located a pair of shorts. He slipped a one-piece jumper over it and decided that that would be enough for the purpose. He retained his slippers. There was no danger of waking anybody even if he clumped down the corridors in spiked shoes, considering the thick, nearly soundproof partitions of this concrete pile, but he saw no point in changing.

He strode toward the door and pulled at the lever. It descended smoothly and he heard the click that meant the door release had

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been activated. Except that it wasn't. And although his biceps tightened as he pulled harder, nothing was accomplished.

He stepped away. This was ridiculous. Had there been a general power failure? There couldn't have been. The clock was going. The visiphone was still receiving properly.

Wait! It could have been the boys, bless their erratic souls. It was done sometimes. Infantile, of course, but he'd taken part in these foolish practical jokes himself. It wouldn't have been difficult, for instance, for one of his buddies to sneak in during the day and arrange matters. Well, no, the ventilation and lights had been working when he went to sleep.

VERY well, then, during the night. The Hall was an old, outmoded structure. It wouldn't have taken an engineering genius to hocus the lighting and ventilation circuits. Or to jam the door, either. And now they would wait for morning and see what would happen when good old Biron found he couldn't get out. They would probably let him out toward noon and laugh very hard.

"Ha, ha," said Biron, grimly, under his breath. All right, if that's the way it was. But he would have to do something about it; turn the tables somehow.

He turned away and his toe kicked something which skidded metallically across the floor. He just made out its shadow move through the dim visiphone light. He reached under the bed, patting the floor in a wide arc. He brought it out and held it close to the light.

"They weren't so smart," he said. "They should have put the visiphone entirely out of commission, instead of just yanking out the sending-circuit."

He found himself holding a small cylinder with a little hole in the blister on top. He put it close to his nose and sniffed at it. That explained the smell in the room, anyway. It was Hypnite. Of course, the boys would have had to use it to keep them from waking him up while they were busy with the circuits.

Biron could reconstruct the proceedings step by step now. The door had been jimmied open, a simple thing to do, and the only dangerous part since he might have wakened then. The door might have been prepared during the day, as a matter of fact, so that it would seem to close and not actually do so. He hadn't tested it. Anyway, once it was open, a can of Hypnite would be put just inside and the door would be closed again. The anesthetic would leak out slowly, building up to the one particle in ten thousand of air necessary to put him definitely under. Then they could enter; masked, of course. Space! A wet handkerchief would keep out the Hypnite for

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fifteen minutes and that would be all the time needed.

It explained the ventilation system situation. That had to be eliminated to keep the Hypnite from dispersing too quickly. That would have gone first, in fact. The visiphone elimination kept him from getting help; the door-jamming kept him from getting out; and the absence of lights in order to induce panic. Nice kids!

Biron snorted. It was socially impossible to be thin-skinned about this. A joke was a joke and all that. Ha-ha! Right now, he would have liked to break the door down and have done with it. The well-trained muscles of his torso tensed at the thought, but it would be useless. The door had been built with atom-blasts in mind. *Damn* that tradition!

But there had to be some way out. He couldn't let them get away with it. First, he would need a light; a real one, not the immovable and unsatisfactory glow of the visiphone. That was no problem. He had a self-powered flashlight in the clothes closet.

For a moment, as he fingered the closet door controls, he wondered if they had jammed that, too. But it moved open naturally, and slid smoothly into its wall socket. Biron nodded to himself. It made sense. There was no reason, particularly, to jam the closet, and they didn't have too much time, anyway.

And then, with the flashlight in his hand, as he was turning away, the entire structure of his theory collapsed in a horrible instant. He stiffened, his abdomen ridging with tension and held his breath, listening.

For the first time since awakening, he heard the murmuring of the bedroom. He heard the quiet, irregular chuckling conversation it was holding with itself, and recognized the nature of the sound at once.

It was impossible not to recognize it. The sound was "Earth's death-rattle." It was the sound that had been invented several thousand years before.

To be exact, it was the sound of a radiation counter, ticking off the charged particles and the hard gamma waves that came its way, the soft clicking electronic surges melting into a low murmur. It was the sound of a counter, counting the only thing it could count—death!

SOFTLY, on tiptoe, Biron backed away. From a distance of six feet he threw the white beam into the recesses of the closet. The counter was there, in the far corner, but seeing it told him nothing.

It had been there ever since his freshman days. Most freshmen from the Outer Worlds bought a counter during their first week on Earth. They were very conscious of Earth's radioactivity then, and felt the need of protection. Usually,

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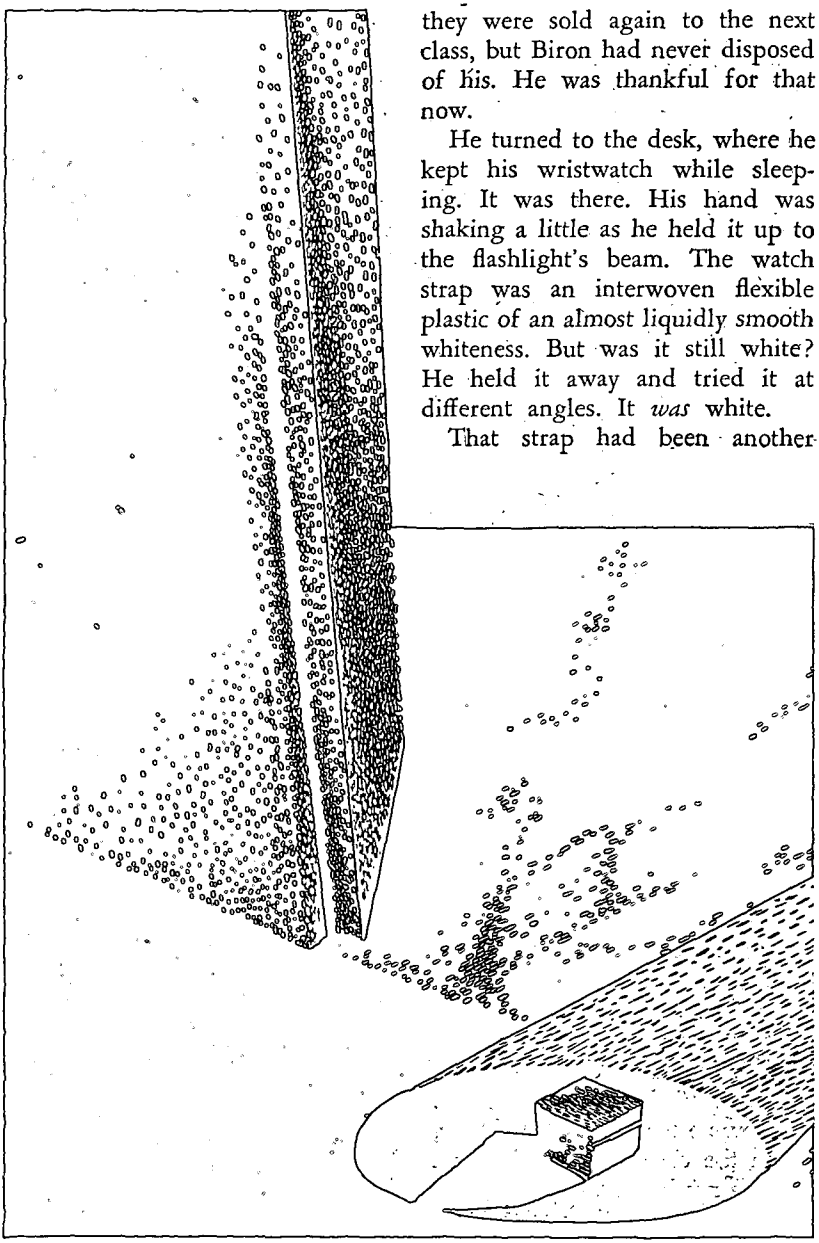

they were sold again to the next class, but Biron had never disposed of his. He was thankful for that now.

He turned to the desk, where he kept his wristwatch while sleeping. It was there. His hand was shaking a little as he held it up to the flashlight's beam. The watch strap was an interwoven flexible plastic of an almost liquidly smooth whiteness. But was it still white? He held it away and tried it at different angles. It *was* white.

That strap had been another

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freshman purchase. Hard radiation turned it blue, and blue on Earth was the color of death. It was easy to wander into a patch of radiating soil during the day if you were lost or careless. The government fenced off as many areas as it could, and, of course, no one ever approached the huge lethal sections that began several miles outside the city. But the strap was insurance.

If it should ever turn a faint blue, you would show up at the hospital for treatment. There was no argument about it. The compound of which it was made was precisely as sensitive to radiation as you were and appropriate photoelectric instruments could be used to measure the intensity of the blueness so that the seriousness of the case might be determined quickly.

A bright royal blue was the finish. Just as the color would never change back, neither would you. There was no cure, no chance, no hope. You just waited anywhere from a day to a week, and all the hospital could do was to make final arrangements for cremation.

But at least it was still white, and some of the clamor in Biron's thoughts subsided.

There wasn't much radioactivity then. Could it be just another angle of the joke? Biron considered and decided that it couldn't. *Nobody* would do that to anyone else. Not on Earth, anyway, where illegal

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handling of radioactive material was a capital offense. They took radioactivity seriously here. They had to. Nobody, therefore, would do this without overpowering reason.

He stated the thought to himself carefully and explicitly, facing it boldly. The overpowering reason, for instance, of a desire to murder. But why? There could be no motive. In his twenty-three years of life, he had never made a serious enemy. Not *this* serious. Not murder serious.

He tugged despairingly at his clipped hair. This was a ridiculous line of thought, but there was no escaping it. He stepped cautiously back to the closet. There had to be something there that was sending out radiation, something that had not been there four hours earlier. He saw it almost at once.

IT WAS a little box not more than six inches in any dimension. Biron recognized it and his lower lip trembled slightly. He had never seen one before, but he had heard of them. He lifted the counter and took it into the bedroom. The little murmur fell off, almost ceased. It started again when the thin mica partition, through which the radiation entered, pointed toward the box. There was no question in his mind. It was a radiation bomb.

The present radiations were not in themselves deadly; they were only a fuse. Somewhere inside the box a tiny atomic-pile was constructed. Short-lived artificial isotopes heated it slowly, permeating it with the appropriate particles. When the threshold of heat and particle density was reached, the pile reacted. Not in an explosion usually, although the heat of reaction would serve to fuse the box itself into a twist of metal, but in a tremendous burst of deadly radiation that would kill anything living within a radius of six feet to six miles, depending on the bomb's size.

There was no way of telling when the threshold would be reached. Perhaps not for hours, perhaps the next moment. Biron remained standing helplessly, flashlight held loosely in his damp hands. Half an hour before, the visiphone had awakened him, and he had been at peace then. Now he knew he was going to die.

Biron didn't want to die, but he was penned in hopelessly, and there was no place to hide.

He knew the geography of the room. It was at the end of a corridor, so that there was another room only on one side, and, of course, one above and below. He could do nothing about the room above. The room on the same floor was on the bathroom side and it adjoined via its own bathroom. He doubted that he could make himself heard.

That left the room below.

There were a couple of folding

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chairs in the room, spare seats to accommodate company. He took one. It made a flat, slapping sound when it hit the floor. He turned it edgewise and the sound became harder and louder.

Between each blow, he waited, wondering if he could rouse the sleeper below and annoy him sufficiently to have him report the disturbance.

Abruptly, he caught a faint noise and paused, the splintering chair raised above his head. The noise came again, like a faint shout. It was from the direction of the door.

He dropped the chair and yelled in return. He crushed his ear up against the crack where door joined wall, but the fit was good, and the sound even there was dim.

But he could make out his own name being called, "Farrill! Farrill!" several times over, and something else. Maybe, "Are you in there?" or, "Are you all right?"

He roared back, "Get the door open." He shouted it three or four times. He was in a feverish sweat of impatience. The bomb might be on the point of letting loose even now.

He thought they heard him. At least, the muffled cry came back, "Watch out. Something, something, blaster." He knew what that meant and backed hurriedly away from the door.

There were a couple of sharp, cracking sounds, and he could actually feel the vibrations set up in the air of the room. Then there followed a splitting noise and the door was flung inward. Light poured in from the corridor.

Biron dashed out, arms flung wide. "Don't come in," he yelled. "For the love of Earth, don't come in. There's a radiation bomb in there."

He was facing two men. One was Jonti. The other was Esbak, the superintendent. He was only partly dressed.

"A radiation bomb?" he stuttered.

But Jonti said, "What size?" Jonti's blaster was still in his hand, and only that jarred with the dandyish effect of his clothes, even at this time of night.

BIRON could only gesture.

"All right," said Jonti. He seemed quite cool about it, as he turned to the superintendent. "You'd better evacuate the rooms in this area, and if you have lead sheets anywhere on the University grounds, have them brought out here to line the corridor. And I wouldn't let anyone in there before morning."

He turned to Biron. "It probably has a twelve to eighteen foot radius. How did it get there?"

"I don't know," said Biron. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "If you don't mind, I've got to sit down somewhere." He threw a glance at his wrist,

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then realized his wristwatch was still in the room. He had a wild impulse to return after it.

There was plenty of action now. Students were being hustled out of their rooms.

"Come with me," said Jonti. "I agree that you had better find a place to sit down and relax. You're white and shaking."

Biron said, "What brought you out to my room? Not that I'm not thankful, you understand, just—curious. Wondering."

"I called you. There was no answer, and I had to see you."

"To see me?" He spoke carefully, trying to control his irregular breathing. "Why?"

"To warn you that your life was in danger."

Biron laughed raggedly. "I found out."

"That was only the first attempt. They'll try again."

"Who are the 'they?' "

"Not here, Farrill," said Jonti. "We need privacy for this. You're a marked man, and I may already have endangered myself as well."

CHAPTER II

The Net Across Space

THE student lounge was empty; dark as well. At four-thirty in the morning it could scarcely have been otherwise. Yet Jonti hesitated a moment as he held the door open, listening for occupants.

"No," he said, softly, "leave the lights out. We don't need them to talk."

"I've had enough of the dark for one night," objected Biron.

"We'll leave the door ajar."

Biron lacked the will to argue. He dropped into the nearest chair and watched the rectangle of light through the closing door narrow down to a thin line. Now that it was all over, he had the shakes.

Jonti steadied the door and rested his little swagger-stick upon the crack of light on the floor. "Watch it. It will tell us if anyone passes, or if the door moves."

Biron said, "Please, I'm not in a conspiratorial mood. If you don't mind, I'd appreciate your telling me whatever it is you want to tell me. You've saved my life, I know, and tomorrow I'll be properly grateful. Right now, I could do with a short drink and a long rest."

"I can imagine your feelings," Jonti said, "but the too-long rest you might have had has been avoided, momentarily. I would like to make it more than just momentarily. Do you know that I know your father?"

The question was an abrupt one, and Biron raised his eyebrows, a gesture lost in the dark. He said, "He has never mentioned knowing you."

"I would be surprised if he did. He doesn't know me by the name I use here. Have you heard from your father recently, by the way?"

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"Why do you ask?"

"Because he is also in great danger."

"What?"

Jonti's hand found the other's arm in the dimness and gripped it firmly. "Please! Keep your voice as it has been." Biron realized, for the first time, that they had been whispering.

Jonti resumed, "I'll be more specific. Your father has been taken into custody. You understand the significance?"

"No, I certainly don't understand. *Who* has taken him into custody, and what are you getting at? Why are you bothering me?" Biron's temples were throbbing. The Hypnite and the near-death had made it impossible to fence on even terms with the cool dandy sitting so close to him.

"Surely," came the whisper, "you have some inkling of the work your father is doing."

"If you know my father, you know he is Rancher of Widemos. That is his work."

Jonti said, "Well, there is no reason you should trust me, other than that I am risking my own life for you. But I already know all you can tell me. As an example, I know that your father has been conspiring against the Tyranni."

"I deny that," said Biron, tensely. "Your service to me tonight does not give you the right to make such statements about my father."

"You are foolishly evasive, young man, and you are wasting my time. Don't you see that the situation is beyond verbal fencing? I'll say it outright. Your father is in the custody of the Tyranni. He may be dead by now."

"I don't believe you."

"I am in a position to know."

"Let's break this off, Jonti. I am in no mood for mystery and I resent this attempt of yours to —"

"To what?" Jonti's voice lost some of its refined edge. "What do I gain by telling you this? Let me remind you that this knowledge of mine, which you will not accept, indicated to me that an attempt might be made to kill you. Judge by what has happened, Farrill."

BIRON said, "Start again and tell it straight. I'll listen."

"Very well. I imagine, Farrill, that you know me to be a fellow countryman from the Nebular Kingdoms, although I've been passing myself off as a Vegan."

"I judged that might be a possibility by your accent. It didn't seem important."

"It is important, my friend. I came here because, like your father, I didn't like the Tyranni. They've been oppressing our people for fifty years. That's a long time."

"I'm not a politician."

Again Jonti's voice had an irritated edge to it. "Oh, I'm not one of their agents trying to get you into trouble. I'm telling you the truth. They caught me a year ago

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as they have caught your father now. But I managed to get away and came to Earth, where I thought I might be safe until I was ready to return. That's all I need tell you about myself."

"It is more than I have asked for." Biron could not force the unfriendliness out of his voice. Jonti affected him unfavorably with his too-precise mannerisms.

"I know that. But it is necessary to tell you so much at least, for it was in this manner that I met your father. He worked with me, or, rather, I with him. He knew me not in his official capacity as the greatest nobleman on the planet of Nephelos. You understand me?"

BIRON nodded uselessly in the darkness and said, "Yes."

"It is not necessary to go into that further. My sources of information have been maintained even here, and I know that he has been imprisoned. It is *knowledge*. Even if it had been merely suspicion, this attempt on your life would have been sufficient proof."

"In what way?"

"If the Tyranni have the father, would they leave the son at large?"

"Are you trying to tell me that the Tyranni set that radiation bomb in my room? That's impossible."

"Why is it impossible? Can't you understand their position? The Tyranni rule fifty worlds; they are outnumbered hundreds to one. In such a position, simple force is not enough. Devious methods, intrigue, assassinations are their devices. The net they weave across space is a wide one and close-meshed. I can well believe that it extends across five hundred light years to Earth."

Biron was still in the grip of his nightmare. In the distance, there were the faint sounds of the lead shields being moved into place. In his room, the counter was still murmuring.

He said, "It doesn't make sense. I am going back to Nephelos this week. They would know that. Why should they kill me here? If they wait, they'd have me." He was relieved to find the flaw, eager to believe his own logic.

Jonti leaned closer and his spiced breath stirred the hair on Biron's temple. "Your father is popular. His death—and once imprisoned by the Tyranni, his execution becomes a probability you must face—will be resented even by the cowed slave-race the Tyranni are trying to breed. You could rally that resentment as the new Rancher of Widemos and to execute you as well would double the danger for them. To make martyrs is not their purpose. But if you were to die in a faraway world, by *accident*, it would be convenient for them."

"I don't believe you," said Biron. It had become his only defense.

Jonti rose, adjusting his thin gloves. He said, "You go too far, Farrill. Your role would be more convincing if you pretended to no

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such complete ignorance. Your father may have been shielding you from reality for your own protection, presumably, yet I doubt that you could remain completely uninfluenced by his beliefs. Your hate for the Tyranni cannot help being a reflection of his own. You cannot help being ready to fight them."

Biron shrugged without answering.

Jonti said, "He may even recognize your new adulthood to the point of putting you to use. You are conveniently here on Earth and it is not unlikely that you may be combining your education with a definite assignment. An assignment, perhaps, for the failure of which the Tyranni are ready to kill you."

"That's silly melodrama."

"Is it? Let it be so, then. If the truth will not persuade you now, events will later. There will be other attempts on your life and the next one will succeed. From this moment on, Farrill, you are a dead man."

BIRON looked up. "Wait! What's your own private interest in me?"

"I am a patriot. I would like to see the Kingdoms free again, with governments of their own choosing."

"No, your *private* interest," Biron insisted doggedly. "I cannot accept idealism only, because I won't believe it of you. I am sorry if that offends you."

Jonti seated himself again. He said, "My lands have been confiscated. Before my exile, it was not comfortable to be forced to take orders from those dwarfs. And since then it has become more imperative than ever to become once again the man my grandfather had been before the Tyranni came. Is that enough of a practical reason for wanting a revolution? Your father would have been a leader of that revolution. Failing him, you!"

"I? I am twenty-three and know nothing of all this. You could find better men."

"Undoubtedly I could, but no one else is the son of your father. If your father is killed, you will be Rancher of Widemos, and, as such, you would be valuable to me if you were only twelve and an idiot besides. I need you for the same reason the Tyranni must be rid of you. And if my necessity is unconvincing to you, surely theirs cannot be. There *was* a radiation bomb in your room. It could only have been meant to kill you. Who else would want to kill you?"

Jonti waited patiently and picked up the other's whisper.

"No one," admitted Biron reluctantly. "No one would want to kill me that I know of. Then it's true about my father."

"It is true. View it as a casualty of war."

"You think that would make it better? They'll put up a monument to him someday, perhaps? One with a radiating inscription that you can

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see ten thousand miles out in space?" His voice was becoming harsh, savage. "Is that supposed to make me happy?"

Jonti waited, but Biron said nothing more.

Jonti said, "What do you intend doing?"

"I'm going home."

"You still don't understand your position, then."

"I said I'm going home. What do you want me to do? If he's alive, I'll get him out of there. And if he's dead, I'll—I'll—"

"You'll do nothing!" The older man's voice was coldly annoyed. "You can't go to Nephelos. Don't you see that you can't? It would be just what the Tyranni would want you to do."

Biron muttered, "What do you suggest?"

"Do you know the Director of Rhodia?"

"The friend of the Tyranni? Everyone in the Kingdoms knows who he is. Hinrik V, Director of Rhodia."

"Have you ever met him?"

"No."

"That is what I meant. If you haven't met him, you don't know him. He is an imbecile, Farrill. I mean it literally. But when the Ranchy of Widemos is confiscated by the Tyranni—and it will be, as my lands were—it will be awarded to Hinrik. There the Tyranni will feel them to be safe, and there you must go."

"Why?"

"Because Hinrik, at least, has influence with the Tyranni; as much influence as a lick-spittle puppet may have. He may arrange to have you reinstated."

"I don't see why. He's more likely to turn me over to them."

"So he is. But you'll be on your guard against it, and there is a fighting chance that you may avoid it. Remember, the title you carry is valuable and important, but it is not all-sufficient. In this business of conspiracy, one must be practical above all. Men will rally about you out of sentiment and respect for your name, but to hold them, you will need money."

BIRON hesitated. "I need time to decide."

"You have no time. Your time ran out when the radiation bomb was planted in your room. The only thing left now is action. I can give you a letter of introduction to Hinrik of Rhodia."

"You know him so well, then."

"Your suspicion never sleeps, does it? I once headed a mission to Hinrik's court on behalf of the Autarch of Lingane. Hinrik's imbecile's mind will probably not remember me, but he will not dare to show he has forgotten. My letter will serve as introduction and you can improvise from there. I will have it for you in the morning. There is a ship leaving for Rhodia at noon. I have tickets for you. I

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am leaving myself, but by another route. Don't linger. You're all through here, aren't you?"

"There is the diploma presentation."

"A scrap of parchment. Does it matter to you?"

"Not now."

"Do you have money?"

"Enough."

"Very well. Too much would be suspicious." He spoke sharply. "Farrill!"

Biron stirred out of what was nearly a stupor. "What?"

"Get back to the others. Tell no one you are leaving. Let the act speak."

Biron nodded dumbly. Far down in the recesses of his mind, there was the thought that his mission had remained unaccomplished and that in this way, too, he had failed his doomed father. He was racked with a futile bitterness. His father might have told him more. He might have shared the dangers. He should not have been allowed to act in ignorance.

And now that he knew the truth, or at least more of it, concerning the extent of his father's role in conspiracy, there was an added importance to the document he was to have obtained from Earth's archives. But there was no time any longer. No time to get the document. No time to wonder about it. No time to save his father. No time, perhaps, to live.

He said, "I'll do as you say."

SANDER JONTI looked briefly out over the University campus as he paused on the steps of the dormitory. Certainly there was no admiration in his glance.

Stepping down the bricked walk that wound unsubtly through the pseudo-rustic atmosphere affected by all urban campuses since antiquity, he could see the lights of the city's single important street gleam just ahead. Past it, drowned in daytime, but visible now, was the eternal radioactive blue of the horizon, mute witness of the historic wars.

Jonti considered the sky for a moment. Over fifty years had passed since the Tyranni had come and put a sudden end to the separate lives of two dozen sprawling, brawling political units in the depths beyond the Nebula. Now, suddenly and prematurely, the peace of strangulation lay upon them.

The storm that had caught them in one vast thunder-clap had been something from which they had not yet recovered. It had left only a sort of twitching that futilely agitated a world here and there, now and then. To organize those twitchings, to align them into a single well-timed heave would be a difficult task, and a long one. Well, he had been rusticating here on Earth long enough. It was time to return.

The others, back home, were probably trying to get in touch with him at his rooms right now.

He lengthened his stride a bit.

He caught the beam as he entered

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his room. It was a personal beam, for whose security there were as yet no fears and in whose privacy there was no chink. No formal receiver was required; no thing of metal and wires to catch the faint, drifting surges of electrons, with their whispered impulses swimming through hyper-space from a world half a thousand light years away.

Space itself was polarized in his room, and prepared for reception. Its fabric was smoothed out of randomness. There was no way of detecting that polarization, except by receiving. And in that particular volume of space, only his own mind could act as receiver, since only the electrical characteristics of his own particular nerve-cell system could resonate to the vibrations of the carrier beam that bore the message.

The message was as private as the unique characteristics of his own brain waves and in all the universe, with its quadrillions of human beings, the odds against a duplication sufficiently close to allow one man to pick up another's personal wave was a twenty-figured-number to one.

Jonti's brain throbbed to the call as it whined through the endless, empty incomprehensibility of hyper-space.

". . . calling . . . calling . . . calling . . . calling . . ."

SENDING was not quite as simple a job as receiving. A mechanical contrivance was needed to set up the highly specific carrier wave that would carry back to the contact beyond the Nebular. That was contained in the ornamental button that Jonti carried on his right shoulder. It was automatically activated when he stepped into his volume of space-polarization, and after that he had only to think purposefully and with concentration.

"Here I am!" No need for more specific identification.

The dull repetition of the call halted and became words that took form within his mind, "We greet you, sir. Widemos has been executed. The news is, of course, not yet public."

"It does not surprise me. Was anyone else implicated?"

"No, sir. The Rancher made no statements at any time. A brave and loyal man."

"Yes. But it takes more than simply bravery and loyalty, or he would not have been caught. A little more cowardice might have been useful. No matter. I have spoken to his son, the new Rancher, who has already had his brush with death. He will be put to use."

"May one inquire in what manner, sir?"

"It is better to let events answer your question. Certainly I cannot foretell consequences at this early date. Tomorrow he will set off to see Hinrik of Rhodia."

"Hinrik! The young man will run a fearful risk. Is he aware that—"

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"I have told him as much as I can," responded Jonti, sharply. "We cannot trust him too far until he has proved himself. Under the circumstances as they exist, we can only view him as a man to be risked, like any other man. He is expendable, *quite* expendable. Do not call me here again, as I am leaving Earth."

And, with a gesture of finality, Jonti broke the connection mentally.

Quietly and thoughtfully, he went over the events of the day and the night, weighing each event. Slowly, he smiled. Everything had been arranged perfectly, and the comedy might now play itself out.

Nothing had been left to chance.

CHAPTER III

Chance and the Wristwatch

THE first hour of a spaceship's rise from planetary thraldom is the most prosaic. There is the confusion of departure, which is much the same in essence as that which must have accompanied the shoving off of the first hollowed-out tree trunk on some primeval river of Earth.

You have your accommodations; your luggage is taken care of; there is the first stiff moment of strangeness and meaningless hustle surrounding you. The shouted last-moment intimacies, the quieting, the muted clang of the airlocks, followed by the slow soughing of air as the locks screw inward automatically, like gigantic drills, becoming air-tight.

Then the portentous silence and the red signs flicking in every room: "Adjust acceleration suits . . . Adjust acceleration suits."

The stewards scour the corridors, knocking shortly on each door and jerking it open: "Beg pardon. Suits on."

You battle with the suits, cold, tight, uncomfortable, but cradled in a hydraulic system which absorbs the sickening pressures of the take-off.

There is the faraway rumble of the atom-driven motors, on low power for atmospheric maneuvering, followed instantly by the giving back against slow-yielding oil of the suit-cradle. You recede almost indefinitely back; then very slowly forward again as the acceleration becomes negative. If you survive nausea during this period, you are probably safe from space-sickness for duration.

The viewroom was not open to the passengers for the first three hours of the flight. There was a long line waiting when the atmosphere had been left behind and the double-doors were ready to separate. There were present not only the usual hundred per cent turnout of all Planetaries—those, in other words, who had never been in space before—but a fair proportion of the more experienced travelers as well.

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The vision of Earth from space, after all, was one of the tourist "musts."

The viewroom was a bubble on the ship's "skin," a bubble of a curved two-foot-thick, steel-hard transparent plastic. The retractile iridium-steel lid which protected it against the scouring of the atmosphere and its dust particles had been rolled back. The lights were out and the gallery was full. The faces peering over the bars were clear in the Earthshine.

For Earth was suspended there below, a gigantic and gleaming orange-and-blue-and-white-patched balloon. The hemisphere showing was almost entirely sunlit; the continents between the clouds, a desert orange, with thin scattered lines of green. The seas were blue, standing out sharply against the black of space where they met the horizon. And all around in the black, undusted sky were the stars.

THEY waited patiently, those who watched.

It was not the sunlit hemisphere they wanted. The polar cap, blinding bright, was shifting into view as the ship maintained the slight, unnoticed sidewise acceleration that was lifting it out of the ecliptic. Slowly the shadow of night encroached upon the globe and the huge "World Island" of Eurasia-Africa majestically took the stage, north-side "down."

Its diseased unliving soil hid its horror under a night-induced play of jewels. The radioactivity of the soil was a vast sea of iridescent blue, sparking in strange festoons that spelled out the manner in which the nuclear bombs had once landed, a full generation before the force-field defense against nuclear explosions had been developed, so that no other world could commit suicide in just that fashion again.

The eyes watched until, with the hours, Earth was a bright little half-coin in the endless black.

Among the watchers was Biron Farrill. He sat by himself in the front row, arms upon the railing, eyes brooding and thoughtful. This was not the way he had expected to leave Earth. It was the wrong manner, the wrong ship, the wrong destination.

His tanned forearm rubbed against the stubble of his chin and he felt guilty about not having shaved that morning. He'd go back to his room after a while and correct that. Meanwhile he hesitated to leave. There were people here. In his room, he would be alone.

Or was that just the reason he should leave?

He did not like the new feeling he had, that of being hunted, of being friendless.

All friendship had dropped from him. It had shriveled from the moment he had been awakened by the phone call less than twenty-four hours earlier.

Even in the dormitory, he had

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become an embarrassment. Old Esbak had pounced upon him when he had returned after his talk with Jonti in the student lounge. Esbak was in turmoil, his voice overshrill.

"Mr. Farrill, I've been looking for you. It has been a most unfortunate incident. I can't understand it. Do you have any explanation?"

"No," Biron had half-shouted, "I don't. When can I get into my room and get my stuff out?"

"In the morning, I am sure. We've just managed to get the equipment up here to test the room. There is no longer any trace of radioactivity above normal background level. It was a very fortunate escape for you. It must have missed you by only minutes."

"Yes, yes, but if you don't mind, I would like to rest."

"Please use my room till morning and then we'll get you relocated for the few days remaining you. Umm, by the way, Mr. Farrill, if you don't mind, there is another matter."

He was being overly polite. Biron could almost hear the eggshells give slightly beneath his finicky feet.

"What other matter?" asked Biron, wearily.

"Do you know of anyone who might have been interested in—er—hazing you?"

"Hazing me like *this*? Of course not."

"What are your plans, then? The school authorities would, of course, be most unhappy to have publicity arise as a result of this incident."

HOW he kept referring to it as an "incident." Biron said, dryly, "I understand you. But don't worry. I'm not interested in investigations or in the police. I'm leaving Earth shortly and I'd just as soon not have my own plans disrupted. I'm not bringing any charges. After all, I'm still alive."

Esbak had been almost indecently relieved. It was all they wanted from him. No unpleasantness. It was just an incident to be forgotten.

He got into his old room again at seven in the morning. It was quiet and there was no murmuring in the closet. The bomb was no longer there, nor was the radiation counter. They had probably been taken away by Esbak and thrown into a contaminated area. It came under the head of destroying evidence, but that was the school's worry. Biron tossed his belongings into suitcases and then called the desk for assignment to another room. The lights were working again, he noticed, and so, of course, was the visiphone. The one remnant of last night was the twisted door, its lock melted away.

They gave him another room. That established his intention to stay for anyone who might be listening. Then, using the hall phone, he had called an aircab. He did not think anyone saw him. Let the

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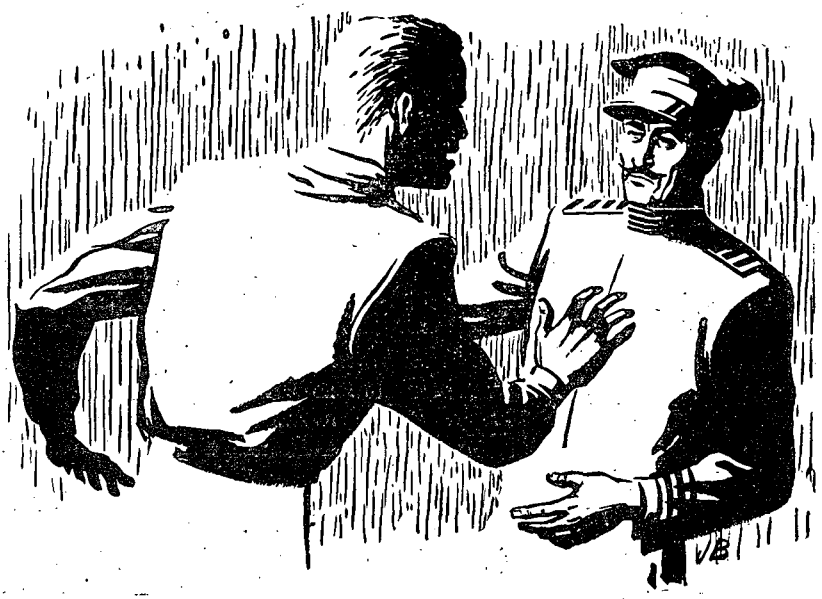
school puzzle out his disappearance however they pleased.

For a moment, he had caught sight of Jonti at the spaceport. They met in the fashion of a glancing blow. Jonti said nothing; gave no sign of recognition, but after he had passed by, there were in Biron's hand a featureless tiny black globe that was a personal message capsule and a ticket for passage to Rhodia.

He spent a moment upon the personal capsule. It was not sealed. He read the message later in his room. It was a simple introduction with *minimum* wordage.

Biron's thoughts rested for a while upon Sander Jonti as he watched Earth shrivel with distance through the viewroom bubble. He had known the man very superficially until Jonti had whirled so devastatingly into his life, first to save it and then to set it upon a new and untried course. Biron had known his name; he had nodded whenever they had passed; had



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exchanged polite formalities occasionally, but that was all. He had not liked the man, had not liked his coldness, his overdressed, overmannered personality. But all that had nothing to do with affairs now.

Biron rubbed his crew-cut with a restless hand and sighed. He actually found himself hungering for Jonti's presence. The man was at least master of events. He had known what to do; he had known what Biron was to do; he had made Biron do it. And now Biron was alone and feeling very young, very helpless, very friendless, and almost frightened.

THROUGH it all, he studiously avoided thinking of his father. It would not help.

"Mr. Malaine."

The name was repeated two or three times, before Biron started at the respectful touch upon his shoulder, and looked up.

The robot messenger said again, "Mr. Malaine," and for five seconds, Biron stared blankly, until he remembered that that was his temporary name. It had been penciled lightly upon the ticket which Jonti had given him. A stateroom had been reserved in that name.

"Yes, what is it? I am Malaine."

The messenger's voice hissed very faintly as the spool within whirled off its message. "I have been asked to inform you that your stateroom has been changed, and that your baggage has already been shifted. If you will see the purser, you will be given your new key and asked to surrender your old. We trust that this will cause no inconvenience for you."

"What's all this?" Biron whirled in his seat, and several of the thinning group of passengers, still watching, looked up at the explosive sound. "What's the idea?"

Of course, it was no use arguing with a machine that had merely fulfilled its function. The messenger bowed its metal head respectfully, its gently fixed imitation of a human smile of ingratiation unchanging, and left.

Biron strode out of the viewroom and accosted the ship's officer at the door with somewhat more energy than he had planned.

"Look here, I want to see the captain."

The officer showed no surprise. "Is it important, sir?"

"It sure as Space is. I've just had my stateroom shifted without my permission and I'd like to know the meaning of it."

Even at the time, Biron felt his anger to be out of proportion to the cause, but it represented an accumulation of resentment. He had nearly been killed; he had been forced to leave Earth like a skulking criminal; he was going he-knew-not-where to do he-knew-not-what; and now they were pushing him around aboard ship. It was too much.

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Yet through it all, he had the uncomfortable feeling that Jonti, in his shoes, would have acted differently, perhaps more wisely. Well, he wasn't Jonti.

The officer said, "I will call the purser."

"I want the captain," insisted Biron.

"If you wish, then." And after a short conversation through the small ship's communicator suspended from his lapel, he said urbanely, "You will be called for. Please wait."

CAPTAIN HIRM GORDELL was a rather short and thick-set man, who rose politely and leaned over his desk to shake hands with Biron when the latter entered.

"Mr. Malaine," he said, "I am sorry we had to trouble you."

He had a rectangular face, iron-gray hair, a short, well-kept mustache of slightly darker hue, and a clipped smile.

"So am I," said Biron. "I had a stateroom reservation to which I was entitled and I feel that not even you, sir, had the right to change it without my permission."

"Granted, Mr. Malaine. But you understand, it was rather an emergency. A last minute arrival, an important man, insisted on being moved to a stateroom closer to the gravitational center of the ship. He had a heart condition and it was important to keep ship's gravity as low as possible for him. We had no choice."

"All right, but why pick on me as the one to be shifted?"

"It had to be someone. You are traveling alone; you are a young man who, we felt, would have no difficulty in taking a slightly higher gravity." His eyes moved automatically up and down Biron's six-feet-two of hard musculature. "Besides, you will find your new room rather more elaborate than your old one. You have not lost by the exchange. No, indeed."

The captain stepped from behind his desk. "May I show you your new quarters personally?"

Biron found difficulty in maintaining his resentment. It seemed reasonable, this whole matter, and, then again, not reasonable, either.

The captain was saying as they left his quarters, "May I have your company at my table for tomorrow night's dinner? Our first Jump is scheduled for that time."

Biron heard himself saying, "Thank you. I will be honored."

Yet he thought the invitation strange. Granted that the captain was merely trying to soothe him, yet surely the method was stronger than necessary.

THE captain's table was a long one, taking up an entire wall of the salon. Biron found himself near the center, taking an unsuitable precedence over others. Yet there was his placecard before him. The

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steward had been quite firm; there was no mistake.

Biron was not particularly overmodest. As son of the Rancher of Widemos, born to the nobility, he would have felt entitled to this kind of respectful treatment. But as Biron Malaine, he was just an ordinary citizen, and these things never happened to ordinary citizens.

For one thing, the captain had been perfectly correct about his new stateroom. It *was* more elaborate. His original room had been what his ticket called for, a single, second class, while the replacement was a double room, first class. There was a bathroom adjoining, private, of course, equipped with a stall-shower and an air-dryer.

It was near "officer's country" and the presence of uniforms was almost overpowering. Lunch had been brought to his room on silver service. A barber made a sudden appearance just before dinner. All this was perhaps to be expected when one traveled as a nobleman on a luxury spaceliner, first class, but it was too good for Biron Malaine, unknown commoner.

It was far too good, for by the time the barber had arrived, Biron had just returned from an afternoon walk that had taken him through the corridors in a purposely devious path. There had been crewmen in his path wherever he had turned; polite, much too attentive. He shook them free somehow and reached 140D, his first room, the one he had never slept in.

HE STOPPED to light a cigaret and in the interval spent thus, the only passenger in sight turned a corridor. Biron touched the signal light briefly and there was no answer.

Well, the old key had not been taken from him yet. An oversight, no doubt. He placed the thin oblong sliver of metal into its slot and the unique pattern of leaden opacity within the aluminum sheath activated the tiny photo-tube. The door opened and he took one step inside.

It was all he needed. He left and the door closed automatically behind him. His old room was not occupied; neither by an important personage with a weak heart nor by anyone else. The bed and furnishings were stripped down; no trunks, no toilet articles were in sight; the very *air* of occupancy was missing.

So the luxury they were surrounding him with served only to prevent his taking further action to get back his original room. They were bribing him to stay quietly out of the old room. Why? Was it the room they were interested in, or was it himself?

And now he sat at the captain's table with the questions unanswered and rose politely with the rest as the captain entered, strode up the steps of the dais on which the long table was set, and took his place.

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Why had they moved him?

There was music in the ship and the walls that separated the salon from the viewroom had been retracted. The lights were low and tinged with orange-red. Even the queaziest passengers' space-sickness had passed after the original acceleration, or as the result of first exposure to the minor gravity variations between various parts of the ship. The salon was full.

THE captain leaned forward and said to Biron, "Good evening, Mr. Malaine. How do you find your new room?"

"Almost too satisfactory, sir. A little rich for my way of life." He said it in a flat monotone, and it seemed to him that a faint dismay passed momentarily across the captain's face.

Over the dessert, the skin of the viewroom's glass bubble slid smoothly back into its socket, and the lights dimmed to nearly nothing. Neither Sun, Earth, nor any planet was in view on that large, dark screen. They were facing the Milky Way, that lengthwise view of the Galactic Lens, and it made a luminous diagonal track among the hard, bright stars.

Automatically, the tide of conversation ebbed. Chairs shifted so that all faced the stars. The dinner guests had become an audience, the music a faint whisper.

The voice over the amplifiers was clear in the gathered quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are ready for our first Jump. Most of you, I suppose, know at least theoretically what a Jump is. Many of you, however, have never experienced one. It is to those last I would like to speak in particular.

"The Jump is exactly what the name implies. In the fabric of space-time itself, it is impossible to travel faster than the speed of light. That is a natural law, first discovered by one of the ancients; the traditional Einstein, perhaps, except that so many things are credited to him. Even at the speed of light, of course, it would take years, in subjective time, to reach the stars.

"Therefore one leaves the space-time fabric to enter the little-known realm of hyper-space, where time and distance have no meaning. It is like traveling across a narrow isthmus to pass from one ocean to another, rather than remaining at sea and circling a continent to reach the same objective.

"Great amounts of energy are required, of course, to enter this 'space within space,' as some call it, and a great deal of ingenious calculation must be made to insure re-entry into ordinary space-time at the proper point. The result of the expenditure of this energy and intelligence is that immense distances can be traversed in zero time. It is only the Jump which makes interstellar travel possible.

"The Jump we are about to make

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will take place in about ten minutes. You will be warned. There is never more than some momentary minor discomfort; therefore, I hope all of you will remain calm. Thank you."

THE ship lights went out altogether, and there were only the stars left.

It seemed a long while before a crisp announcement filled the air momentarily. "The Jump will take place in exactly one minute." And then the same voice counted the seconds backward: "Fifty . . . forty . . . thirty . . . twenty . . . ten . . . five . . . three . . . two . . . one . . ."

It was as though there had been a momentary discontinuity in existence, a bump which joggled only the deep inside of a man's bones.

In that immeasurable fraction of a second, one hundred light years had passed, and the ship, which had been on the outskirts of the Solar system, was now in the depths of interstellar space.

Someone near Biron said, shakily, "Look at the stars!"

In a moment, the whisper had taken life through the large room and hissed itself across the tables: "The stars! See!"

In that same immeasurable fraction of a second, the star-view had changed radically. The center of the great Galaxy, which stretched thirty thousand light years from tip to tip, was closer now, and the stars had thickened in number. They spread across the black velvet vacuum in a fine powder, backdropping the occasional brightness of the nearby stars.

Biron, against his will, remembered the beginning of a poem he himself had once written at the sentimental age of nineteen, on the occasion of his first space flight; the one that had first taken him to the Earth he was now leaving:

> The stars, like dust, encircle me
> In living mists of light;
> And all of space I seem to see
> In one vast burst of sight.

The lights went on then, and Biron's thoughts were snapped out of space as suddenly as they had entered it. He was in a spaceliner's salon again, with a dinner dragging to an end, and the hum of conversation rising to a prosaic level.

He glanced at his wristwatch, half looked away; then, very slowly brought the wristwatch into focus again. He stared at it for a long minute. It was the wristwatch he had left in his bedroom that night. It had withstood the killing radiation of the bomb, and he had collected it with the rest of his belongings the next morning. How many times had he looked at it since then? How many times had he stared at it, taken mental note of the time, and no note at all of the other piece of information it shouted at him?

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For the plastic wrist band was white, not blue. *It was white!*

Slowly the events of that night, all of them, fell into place. Strange how one fact could shake all the confusion out of them.

He rose abruptly, murmuring, "Pardon me!" under his breath. It was a breach of etiquette to leave before the captain, but that was a matter of small importance to him then.

He hastened to his room, striding up the ramps rapidly, rather than waiting for the non-gravity elevators. He locked the door behind him and looked quickly through the bathroom and the built-in closets. He had no real hope of catching anyone. What they had had to do, they must have done hours ago.

Carefully, he went through his baggage. They had done a thorough job. With scarcely any sign to show that they had come and gone, they had carefully withdrawn his identification papers, a packet of letters from his father, and even his capsular introduction to Hinrik of Rhodia.

THAT was why they had moved him. It was neither the old room nor the new that they were interested in; merely the process of moving. For nearly an hour they must have legitimately—*legitimately*, by Space—concerned themselves with his baggage, and served their own purposes thereby.

Biron sank down upon the double bed and thought furiously, but it didn't help. The trap had been perfect. *Everything* had been planned. Had it not been for the completely unpredictable chance of his leaving his wristwatch in the bedroom that night, he would not even now have realized how close-meshed the Tyranni's net through space was.

There was a soft burr as his door signal sounded.

"Come in," he said.

It was the steward, who said respectfully, "The captain wishes to know if there is anything he can do for you. You seemed ill as you left the table."

"I'm all right," Biron said, feeling very far from all right.

How they watched him! And in that moment, he knew that there was no escape, and that the ship was carrying him politely, but surely, to his death.

CHAPTER IV

Free?

SANDER JONTI met the other's eyes coldly. He repeated, "Gone, you say?"

Rizzett passed a hand over his ruddy face. "*Something* is gone. I don't know its identity. It might have been the document we're after, certainly. All we know about it is that it had been dated somewhere in the fifteenth to twenty-first cen-

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tury of Earth's primitive calendar, and that it is dangerous."

"Is there any definite reason to believe that the missing one is *the* document?"

"Only circumstantial reasoning. It was guarded closely by the Earth government."

"Discount that," Jonti said impatiently. "An Earthman will treat any documents relating to the pre-Galactic past with veneration. It's their ridiculous worship of tradition."

"But this one was stolen and yet they never announced the fact. Why should they guard an empty case?"

"I can imagine their doing that rather than find themselves forced to admit that a holy relic has been stolen. Yet I cannot believe that young Farrill obtained it after all. I thought you had him under observation."

RIZZETT smiled confidently. "*He* didn't get it."

"How do you know?"

"Because," said Rizzett, "the document has been gone twenty years."

"What?"

"It was lost or stolen twenty years ago," Rizzett explained.

"Then it can't be the right one. It was less than six months ago that the Rancher learned of its existence."

"Then somebody else beat him to it by nineteen and a half years."

Jonti thought silently. He said, "It does not matter. It cannot matter."

"Why so?"

"Because I have been here on Earth for months. Before I came, it was easy to believe that there might be information of value on the planet. But consider now. When Earth was the only inhabited planet in the Galaxy, it was a primitive place, militarily speaking. The only weapon they had ever invented worth mentioning was a crude and inefficient nuclear-reaction bomb for which they had not even developed the logical defense." Jonti's nattily sleeved arm made a delicate gesture to where the blue horizon gleamed its sickly radioactivity.

He went on, "All this is placed in sharp focus for me as a temporary resident here. It is ridiculous to assume that it is possible to learn anything from a society at that level of military technology. It is always very fashionable to assume that there are lost arts and lost sciences, and there are always these people who make a cult of primitivism, making all sorts of ridiculous claims for the prehistoric civilizations on Earth."

"Yet the Rancher was a wise man," Rizzett objected. "He told us specifically that it was the most dangerous document he knew. You remember what he said. I can quote it. He said, 'The matter is death for the Tyranni, and death for those who use it as well; but it would mean final life for the Galaxy.'"

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"The Rancher, like all human beings, can be wrong."

"Consider, sir, that we have no idea as to the nature of the document. It could, for instance, be somebody's laboratory notes which had never been published. It might be something that could relate to a weapon that Earthmen had never recognized as a weapon; something which on the face of it might not appear to be a weapon—"

"Nonsense. You are a military man and should know better. If there is one science into which Man has probed continuously and successfully, it is that of military technology. No potential weapon would remain unrealized for ten thousand years. I think, Rizzett, we will return to Lingane."

Rizzett shrugged. He was not convinced.

Nor, a thousandfold, was Jonti. It had been stolen and that was significant. It had obviously been *worth* stealing. Anyone in the Galaxy might have it now.

Unwillingly the thought came to him that the Tyranni might have it. The Rancher had been most evasive on the matter. Even Jonti, himself, had not been trusted sufficiently. The Rancher had said it carried death; it could not be used without having it cut both ways. Jonti's lips clamped shut. The fool and his idiotic hintings! And now the Tyranni had him.

What if a man like Aratap were now in the possession of such a secret as this might be? Aratap! The one man, now that the Rancher was gone, who remained unpredictable; the most dangerous Tyrannian of them all.

SIMOK ARATAP was a small man; a little bandy-legged, narrow-eyed fellow. He had the stumpy, thick-limbed appearance of the average Tyrannian, yet, though he faced an exceptionally large and well-muscled specimen of the subject worlds, he was completely self-possessed. He was the confident heir (in the second generation) of those who had left their windy, infertile worlds and sparked across the emptiness to capture and enchain the rich and populous planets of the Nebular Regions.

His father had headed a squadron of small, flitting ships that had struck and vanished, then struck again; and had made scrap of the lumbering titanic ships that had opposed them.

The worlds of the Nebula had fought in the old fashion, but the Tyranni had learned a new one. Where the huge, glittering vessels of the opposed navies attempted single combat, they found themselves flailing at emptiness and wasting their stores of energy. Instead, the Tyranni, abandoning power alone, stressed speed and cooperation, so that the opposed kingdoms toppled one after the other, singly, each waiting half-joyfully at the discomfiture of its

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neighbors, fallaciously secure behind its steel-shipped ramparts, until its own turn came.

But those wars were fifty years in the past. Now the Nebular regions were satrapies that required merely the acts of occupation and taxation. Previously there had been worlds to gain, Aratap thought wearily, and now there was little left to do but to contend with individual men.

He looked at the young man who faced him. A very young man. A tall fellow with good shoulders indeed; an absorbed, intent face with the hair of his head cut ridiculously short in what was undoubtedly a collegiate affectation. In an unofficial sense, Aratap was sorry for him. He was obviously frightened.

BIRON did not recognize the feeling inside him as "fright." If he had been asked to put a name to the emotion, he would have described it as "tension." All his life, he had known the Tyranni to be the overlords. His father, strong and vital though he was, unquestioned on his own estate, respectfully heard on others, was quiet and almost humble in the presence of the Tyranni.

They came occasionally to Widemos on polite visits, with questions as to the annual tribute they called taxation. The Rancher of Widemos was responsible for the collection and delivery of these funds on behalf of the planet Nephelos and, perfunctorily, the Tyranni would check his books.

The Rancher himself would assist them out of their small vessels. They would sit at the head of the table at mealtimes where they would be served first. When they spoke, all other conversation stopped instantly.

As a child, he wondered that such small, ugly men should be so carefully handled, but he learned as he grew up that they were, to his father, what his father was to a cowhand. He even learned to speak softly to them himself, and to address them as "Excellency."

He had learned so well that now that he faced one of the overlords, one of the Tyranni, he could feel himself stiffen with tension.

The ship which he had considered his prison became officially one on the day of landing upon Rhodia. They had signaled at his door and two husky crewmen had entered and stood on either side of him. The captain, who followed, had said in a flat voice, "Biron Farrill, I take you into custody by the power vested in me as captain of this vessel, and hold you for questioning by the Commissioner of the Great King."

The Commissioner was this small Tyrannian who sat before him now, seemingly abstracted and uninterested. The "Great King" was the Khan of the Tyranni, who still lived in the legendary stone palace on the Tyrannian's home planet.

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Biron looked furtively about him. He was not physically constrained in any way, but four guards in the slate-blue of the Tyrannian "Outer Police" flanked him, two and two. They were armed. A fifth, with a major's insignia, sat beside the Commissioner's desk.

The Commissioner spoke for the first time, his voice high-pitched, thin. "The old Rancher of Widemos, your father, has been executed for treason."

His faded eyes were fixed on Biron's. There seemed nothing beyond mildness in them.

Biron remained stolid. It bothered him that he could do nothing. It would have been so much more satisfying to howl at them, to flail madly at them, but that would not make his father less dead. He thought he knew the reason for this initial statement. It was intended to break him down, to make him give himself away. Well, it wouldn't.

He said, evenly, "I am Biron Malaine of Earth. If you are questioning my identity, I would like to communicate with the Terrestrial Consul."

"Ah, yes, but we are at a purely informal stage just now. You are Biron Malaine, you say, of Earth. And yet," Aratap indicated the papers before him, "there are letters here which were written by Widemos to his son. There are college registration receipts and tickets to commencement exercises made out to Biron Farrill. They were found in your baggage."

Biron felt desperate, but he did not let it show. "My baggage was searched illegally, so that I deny that this is evidence."

"We are not in a court of law, Mr. Farrill or Malaine. How do you explain them?"

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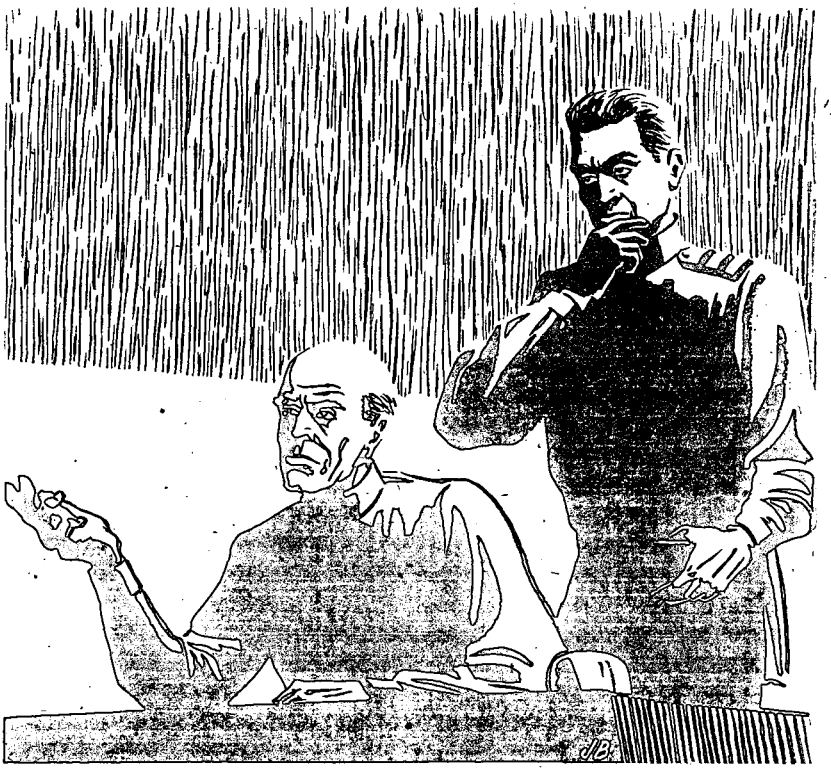

"If they were found in my baggage, they were placed there by someone else."

The Commissioner passed it by. Biron felt amazed. His statements sounded so thin, so patently foolish, yet the Commissioner did not remark upon them, but only tapped the black capsule. "And this introduction to the Director of Rhodia? Also not yours?"

"No, that is mine." Biron had planned that. The introduction did not mention his name. He said, "There is a plot to assassinate the Director—"

He stopped, appalled. It sounded so completely unconvincing when he finally put the beginning of his carefully prepared speech into actual sound. Surely, the Commissioner was smiling cynically at him.

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But Aratap was not. He merely sighed a little and with quick, practiced gestures removed contact lenses from his eyes and placed them carefully in a glass of saline solution that stood on the desk before him. His naked eyeballs were a little watery.

He said, "And you know of it? Even back on Earth, five hundred light-years away? Our own police here on Rhodia have not heard of it."

"The police are here. The plot is being developed on Earth."

"I see. And are you their agent? Or are you going to warn Hinrik against them?"

"The latter, of course."

"Indeed? And why do you intend to warn him?"

"For the substantial reward which I expect to get."

Aratap smiled. "That at least rings true, and lends a certain truthful gloss to your previous statements. What are the details of the plot you speak of?"

"That is for the Director only."

A momentary hesitation, then a shrug. "Very well. The Tyranni are not interested and do not concern themselves with local politics. We will arrange an interview between yourself and the Director and that will be our contribution to his safety. My men will hold you until your baggage can be collected, and then you will be free to go. Remove him."

The last was to the armed men, who left with Biron. Aratap replaced his contact lenses, an action which changed instantly that look of vague incompetence their absence had seemed to induce.

He said to the major, who had remained, "We will keep an eye, I think, on this young Farrill."

The officer nodded shortly. "For a moment I thought you might have been taken in. To me, his story was pure nonsense."

"It was. It's just that which makes him maneuverable for the while. All young fools who get their notions of interstellar intrigue from the video spy-thrillers are easily handled. He *is*, of course, the son of the ex-Rancher."

NOW the major hesitated, "Are you sure? It's a vague and unsatisfactory accusation we have against him."

"You mean that it might be arranged evidence after all? For what purpose?"

"It could mean that he is a decoy, sacrificed to divert our attention from a real Biron Farrill elsewhere."

"No. Improbably theatrical. Besides, we have a photocube."

"What? Of the boy?"

"Of the Rancher's son. Would you like to see it?"

Aratap lifted the paperweight upon his desk. It was a simple glass cube, three inches on each side, black and opaque. He said, "I meant to confront him with it,

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if it had seemed best. It is a shrewd process, this one, Major. I don't know if you're acquainted with it. It's been developed recently among the inner worlds. Outwardly, it seems an ordinary photocube, but when it is turned upside down, there's an automatic molecular rearrangement which renders it totally opaque. It is a pleasant conceit."

HE TURNED the cube right-side up. The opacity shimmered for a moment, then cleared slowly like a black fog wisping and feathering before the wind. Aratap watched it calmly.

And then it was water clear, and a young face smiled brightly out of it, accurate and alive, trapped and solidified in mid-breath forever.

"An item," said Aratap, "in the ex-Rancher's possessions. What do you think?"

"It is the young man, without question."

"Yes." The Tyrannian official regarded the photocube thoughtfully. "You know, using this same process, I don't see why six photographs could not be taken in the same cube. It has six faces, and by resting the cube on each of them in turn, a series of new molecular orientations might be induced. Six connected photographs, flowing one into another as you turned; a static phenomenon turned dynamic and taking on new breadth and vision. Major, it would be a new art form." A mounting enthusiasm had crept into his voice.

But the silent major looked faintly scornful, and Aratap left his artistic reflections to say, abruptly, "You will watch Farrill?"

"Certainly."

"Watch Hinrik as well."

"Hinrik?"

"Of course. It is the whole purpose of freeing the boy. I want some questions answered. Why is Farrill seeing Hinrik? What is the connection between them? The dead Rancher did not play a lone hand. There was—there *must* have been—a well-organized conspiracy behind him."

"But surely Hinrik could not be involved. He lacks the intelligence, even if he had the courage."

"Granted. But it is just because he is half an idiot that he may serve them as a tool. If so, he represents a weakness in our scheme of things. We obviously cannot afford to neglect the possibility."

He gestured absently; the major saluted, swung on his heel and left.

Aratap sighed, turned the photocube thoughtfully in his hand and watched the blackness wash back like a tide of ink.

Life had been simpler in his father's time. To smash a planet had a cruel grandeur about it, while this careful maneuvering of an ignorant young man was simply cruel.

And yet necessary.

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CHAPTER V

Uneasy Lies the Head

THE Directorship of Rhodia is not ancient, when compared with Earth, as a habitat for *Homo sapiens*. It is not ancient even when compared with the Centaurian or Sirian worlds. The planets of Arcturus, for instance, had been settled for two hundred years when the first spaceships circled the Horsehead Nebula to find the nest of hundreds of oxygen-water planets behind. They clustered thickly and it was a real find, for although planets infest space, few can maintain human life.

There are between one and two hundred billion radiant stars in the Galaxy. Among them are some five hundred billion planets. Of these, some have gravities over 120% that of Earth, or less than 60%, and are therefore unbearable in the long run. Some are too hot; some too cold. Some have poisonous atmospheres, and planetary atmospheres consisting largely or entirely of neon, methane, ammonia, chlorine, even silicon tetrafluoride have been recorded. Some planets lack water, one with oceans of almost pure sulfur dioxide having been described. Others lack carbon.

Any one of these failings is sufficient, so that not one world in a hundred thousand can be lived on. Yet this still leaves an estimated four million habitable planets.

The exact number of these which are actually occupied is disputable. According to the Galactic Almanac, admittedly dependent on imperfect records, Rhodia was the 1,098th world settled by Man.

Ironically enough, Tyrann, eventually Rhodia's conqueror, was the 1,099th.

The pattern of history in the Trans-Nebular region was distressingly similar to that elsewhere during the period of development and expansion. Planet governments were set up in rapid succession, each government confined to its own world. With expanding economy, neighboring planets were colonized and integrated with the home society. Small "empires" were established and these inevitably clashed.

Hegemony over sizable regions was established by first one, then another of these governments, depending upon the fluctuations of the fortunes of war and of leadership.

ONLY Rhodia maintained a lengthy stability, under the able dynasty of the Hinriads. It was perhaps well on the road to finally establishing a universal Trans-Nebular Empire in a stolid century or two, when the Tyranni came and did the job in ten years.

Ironical that it should be the men of Tyrann. Until then, during the seven hundred years of its existence, Tyrann had done little better than

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maintain a precarious autonomy, thanks largely to the undesirability of its barren landscape, which, because of a planetary water-dearth, was largely desert.

But even after the Tyranni came, the Directorship of Rhodia continued. It had actually grown. The Hinriads were popular with the people, so their existence served as a means of easy control. The Tyranni did not care who got the cheers as long as they themselves received the booty and power.

To be sure, the Directors were no longer the Hinriads of old. The Directorship had always been elective within the family so that the ablest might be chosen. Adoptions into the family had been encouraged for the same purpose.

But now the Tyranni could influence the elections for other reasons, and twenty years earlier, for instance, Hinrik (fifth of that name) had been chosen Director. To the Tyranni, it had seemed a useful choice.

Hinrik had been a handsome man at the time of his election, and he still made an impressive appearance when he addressed the Rhodian Council. His hair had grayed smoothly and his thick mustache remained, startlingly enough, as black as his daughter's eyes.

At the moment, he faced his daughter, and she was furious. She lacked only two inches of his height, and the Director lacked less than an inch of six feet. She was a smoldering girl, dark of hair and of eyes, and, at the moment, loweringly dark of complexion.

She said, again, "I can't do it!"

Hinrik said pleadingly, "But, Arta, this is unreasonable. What am I to do? What *can* I do? In my position, what choice have I?"

"If mother were alive, *she* would find a way out." She stamped her foot. Her full name was Artemisia, a royal name that had been borne by at least one female of the Hinriads in every generation.

"Yes, yes, no doubt. Bless my soul, what a way your mother had with her. There are times when you seem all of her and none of me. But surely, Arta, you haven't given him a chance. Have you observed his—ah—better points?"

"WHICH are?"

"The ones which . . ." He gestured vaguely, thought a while and gave it up. He approached her and would have put a consoling hand upon her shoulder, but she squirmed away from him, her scarlet gown shimmering in the air.

"I have spent an evening with him," she said, bitterly, "and he tried to kiss me. It was disgusting!"

"But everyone kisses, dear. It's not as though this were your grandmother's time. Kisses are nothing, less than nothing. Young blood, Arta, young blood!"

"Young blood, my foot. The

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only time that horrible little man has had young blood in him these fifteen years has been immediately after a transfusion. He's four inches shorter than I am, father. How can I be seen in public with a pygmy?"

"He's an important man. Very important!"

"That doesn't add a single inch to his height. He is bowlegged, as they all are, and his breath smells."

"His breath smells?"

ARTEMISIA wrinkled her nose at her father. "That's right; it has an unpleasant odor. I didn't like it and I made sure to let him know it."

Hinrik dropped his jaw wordlessly for a moment, then said in a hoarse half-whisper, "You—let him know it? You implied that a high official of the Royal Court of Tyrann could have an unpleasant personal characteristic?"

"He did! I have a nose, you know! So when he got too close, I just held it and pushed. A figure of man to admire, that one is. He went flat on his back, with his legs sticking up." She gestured with her fingers in illustration, but it was lost on Hinrik, who, with a moan, hunched his shoulder and put his hands over his face.

He peered miserably from between two fingers. "What will happen now? How can you act so?"

"It didn't do me any good. Do you know what he said? Do you have any idea what he said? It was the last straw. It was absolutely the limit. I made up my mind then that I couldn't stand that man if he were ten feet tall."

"But what did he say?"

"He said—straight out of a video, father—he said, 'Ha! A spirited wench! I like her all the better for that!' And two servants helped stagger him to his feet. But he didn't try to breathe in my face again."

Hinrik doubled into a chair, leaned forward and regarded Artemisia earnestly. "You could go through the motions of marrying him, couldn't you? You needn't be in earnest. Why not merely for the sake of political necessity. . .?"

"How do you mean, not in earnest, father? Shall I cross the fingers of my left hand while signing the contract with my right?"

Hinrik looked confused. "No, of course not. What good would that do? How would crossing fingers alter the validity of the contract? Really, Arta, I'm surprised at your stupidity."

Artemisia sighed. "What *do* you mean, then?"

"Mean by what? You see, you've disrupted things. I can't keep my mind on matters properly when you argue with me. What was I saying?"

"I was merely to pretend I was getting married, or something. Remember?"

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"Oh, yes. I mean, you needn't take it too seriously, you see."

"I can have lovers, I suppose."

HINRIK stiffened and frowned. "Arta! I brought you up to be a modest, self-respecting girl. So did your mother. How can you say such things? It's shameful."

"But isn't that what you mean?"

"*I* can say it. I am a man, a mature man. A girl like you ought not to repeat it."

"Well, I have repeated it and I don't see how talking is worse than doing. I'll probably *have* to have them if I'm forced to marry for reasons of state, but there are limits." She placed her hands upon her hips, and the capelike sleeves of her gown slithered away from her tanned and dimpled shoulders. "But he would still be my husband and I just can't bear that particular thought."

"He's an old man, my dear. Life with him would be short."

"Not short enough, thank you. Five minutes ago, he had young blood. Remember?"

Hinrik spread his hands wide and let them drop. "Arta, the man is a Tyrannian, and a powerful one. He is in good odor at the Khan's court."

"The Khan might think it's a good odor. He probably would. He must smell even worse—maybe that is how they judge rank, by rankness."

Hinrik's mouth was an O of horror. Automatically, he looked over his shoulder. Then he said, hoarsely, "Don't ever say anything like that again."

"I will if I feel like it. Besides, the man has had three wives already." She forestalled him, "Not the Khan, the man you want me to marry."

"But they're dead," Hinrik explained, earnestly. "Arta, they're not alive. Don't think that. How can you imagine I would let my daughter marry a bigamist? We'll have him produce documents. He married them consecutively, not simultaneously, and they're dead now, entirely dead, all of them."

"It's no wonder."

"Oh, bless my soul, what shall I do?" He made a last effort at dignity. "Arta, it is the price of being a Hinriad and a Director's daughter."

"I didn't ask to be a Hinriad and a Director's daughter."

"That has nothing to do with it. It is just that the history of all the Galaxy, Arta, shows that there are occasions when reasons of State, the safety of planets, the best interests of peoples, require that—uh. . . ."

"That some poor girl prostitute herself."

"Oh, this vulgarity! Someday, you'll see, someday you'll blurt something of the sort in public."

"Well, that's what it is, and I won't do it. I'd rather die. I'd rather do *anything*. And I will."

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The Director got to his feet and held out his arms to her. His lips trembled and he said nothing. She ran to him in a sudden agony of tears and clung desperately to him. "I can't. Don't make me."

He patted her awkwardly. "But if you don't, what will happen? If the Tyranni are displeased, they will remove me, imprison me, maybe even exec—" He gagged on the word. "These are very unhappy times, Arta, very unhappy. The Rancher of Widemos was condemned last week and I believe he has been executed. You remember him, Arta? He was at court half a year ago. A big man, with a round head and deep-set eyes. You were frightened of him at first."

"I remember."

"Well, he is probably dead. And who knows, myself next, perhaps. Your poor, harmless old father next. It is a bad time. He was at our court and that's very suspicious."

SHE suddenly held herself out at arm's length. "Why should it be suspicious? You weren't involved with him, were you?"

"I? Indeed not. But if we openly insult the Khan of Tyrann by refusing an alliance with one of his favorites, they may choose to think even that."

Hinrik's hand-wringing was interrupted by the muted buzz of the extension. He started uneasily.

"I'll take it in my own room. You just rest. You'll feel better after a nap. You'll see, you'll see. It's just that you're a little on edge now."

Artemisia looked after him and frowned. Her face was intensely thoughtful, and for minutes only the gentle tide of her breasts betrayed life.

There was the sound of stumbling feet at the door. She turned.

"What is it?" The tone was sharper than she had intended.

It was Hinrik, his face sallow with fear. "Major Andros was calling."

"Of the Outer Police?"

Hinrik could only nod.

Artemisia cried, "Surely, he's not. . . ." She paused reluctantly at the threshold of putting the horrible thought into words, but waited in vain for enlightenment.

"There is a young man who wants audience. I don't know him. Why should he come here? He's from Earth." He was gasping for breath and shivering as he spoke, as though his mind were on a turn-table and he had to follow it in its gyrations.

The girl ran to him and seized his elbow. She said, sharply, "Sit down, father. Tell me what has happened." She shook him and some of the panic drained out of his face.

"I don't know exactly," he whispered. "There's a young man coming here with details concerning a plot on my life. On *my* life! And

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they tell me I ought to listen to him." He smiled foolishly. "I'm loved by the people. No one would want to kill me. Would they?"

He was watching her eagerly, and relaxed when she said. "Of course, no one would want to kill you."

Then he was tense again. "Do you think it might be *they?*"

"Who?"

He leaned over to whisper, "The Tyranni. The Rancher of Widemos was here yesterday, and they killed him." His voice ascended the scale. "And now they're sending someone over to kill me."

Artemisia gripped his shoulder with such force that his mind turned to the present pain.

She said, "Father! Sit quietly! Not a word! Listen to me. No one will kill you. Do you hear me? No one will kill you. It was six months ago that the Rancher was here. Do you remember? Wasn't it six months ago? Think!"

"So long ago?" whispered the Director. "Yes, yes, it must have been."

"Now you stay here and rest. You're overwrought. I'll see the young man myself and then I'll bring him to you if it's safe."

"Will you, Arta? Will you? He won't hurt a woman. Surely, he wouldn't hurt a woman."

She bent suddenly and kissed his cheek.

"Be careful," he murmured, and closed his eyes wearily.

CHAPTER VI

That Wears a Crown!

BIRON FARRILL waited uneasily in one of the outer buildings on the Palace Grounds. For the first time in his life, he experienced the deflating sensation of being a provincial.

Widemos Hall, where he had grown up, had been beautiful in his eyes, and now his memory endowed it with a merely barbaric glitter. Its curved lines, its filigree work, its curiously wrought turrets, its elaborate "false-windows"—He winced at the thought of them.

Earth was mellower, but it was minute and dreaming. The public buildings had been of white, glossy stone; the private homes, of plastic "near-stone" in pastel shades. The net effect had been one of gingerbread and sugar-candy. It was a toy world.

But this? This was different.

The Palace Grounds of Rhodia was no mere lump of ostentation built by the petty lords of a cattle kingdom; nor was it the childlike expression of a fading and dying world. It was the culmination, in stone, of the Hinriad dynasty.

The buildings were strong and quiet. Their lines were straight and vertical, lengthening toward the center of each structure, yet avoiding anything as effeminate as a spire effect. They held a bluntness about them, yet lifted into a climax

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that affected the onlooker without revealing their method of doing so at a casual glance. They were reserved, self-contained, proud.

And as each building was, so was the group as a whole, the huge Palace Central becoming a crescendo. One by one, even the few artificialities remaining in the masculine Rhodian style had dropped away. The very "false-windows," so valued as decoration and so useless in a building of artificial light and ventilation, were done away with. And that, somehow, without loss.

It was only line and plane, a geometrical abstraction that led the eye upward to the sky.

The Tyrannian major stopped briefly at his side as he left the inner room.

"You will be received now."

Biron nodded, and after a while a larger man in a uniform of scarlet and tan clicked heels before him. It struck Biron with sudden force that those who had the real power did not need the outward show and could be satisfied with slate-blue. He recalled the splendid formality of a Rancher's life and bit his lip at the thought of its futility.

"Biron Malaine?" said the Rhodian guard, and Biron rose to follow.

THERE was a little gleaming monorail carriage that was suspended delicately by diamagnetic forces upon a single ruddy shaft of metal. Biron had never seen one before. He paused before entering.

The little carriage, big enough for five or six at the most, swayed with the wind, a graceful teardrop returning the gleam of Rhodia's splendid sun. The single rail was slender, scarcely more than a cable, and ran the length of the carriage's underside without touching. Biron bent and saw blue sky all the length between them. For a moment, as he watched, a lifting gust of wind raised it, so that it hovered a full inch above the rail, as though impatient for flight and tearing at the invisible force-field that held it. Then it fluttered back to the rail, closer and still closer, but never touching.

"Get in," said the guard behind him, impatiently, and Biron climbed two steps into the carriage.

The steps remained long enough for the guard to follow, then lifted quietly and smoothly into place, forming no break in the carriage's even exterior.

Biron became aware that the outer opacity of the carriage was an illusion. Once within, he found himself sitting in a transparent bubble. At the motion of a small control, the carriage lifted upward. It climbed the heights easily, buffeting at the atmosphere which whistled past. For one moment, Biron caught the panorama of the Palace Grounds from the apex of the arc.

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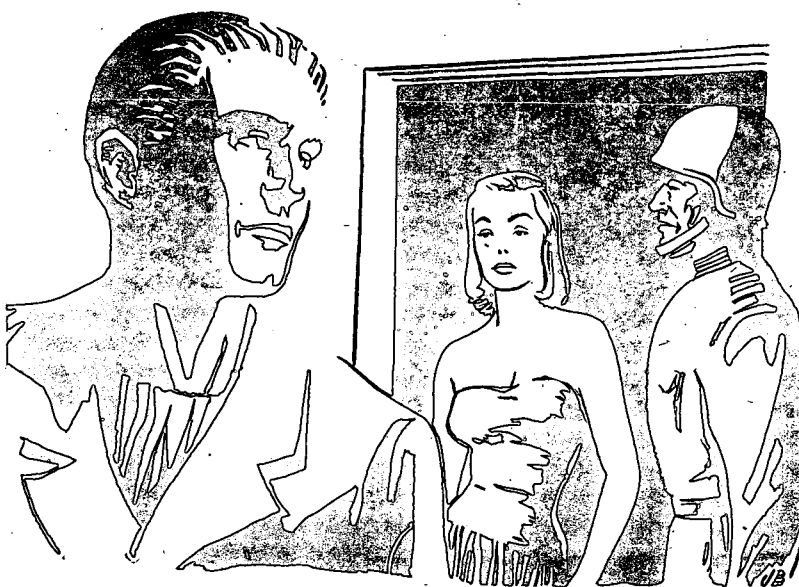

The structures became a gorgeous whole—could they have been originally conceived other than as an air-view?—laced by the shining copper threads, along one or two of which the graceful carriage-bubbles skimmed.

He felt himself pressed forward, and the carriage came to a dancing halt. The entire run had lasted less than two minutes.

A door stood open before him. He entered and it closed behind him. There was no one in the room, which was small and bare. For the moment, no one was pushing him, but he felt no comfort because of it. He was under no illusions. Ever since that damned night, others had forced his moves.

Jonti had placed him on the ship. The Tyrannian Commissioner had placed him here. And each move had increased the measure of his desperation.

It was obvious to Biron that the Tyrannian had not been fooled. It had been too easy to get away from him. The Commissioner might have called the Terrestrial consul. He

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might have hyper-waved Earth, or taken his retinal patterns. These things were routine; could not have been omitted accidentally.

He remembered Jonti's analysis of affairs. Some of it might still be valid. The Tyranni would not kill him outright to create another martyr. But Hinrik was their puppet, and he was as capable as they of ordering an execution. In that case, Biron would have been killed by one of his own, and the Tyranni merely be disdainful onlookers.

Biron clenched his fists tightly. He was tall and strong, but he was unarmed. The men who would come for him would have blasters and neuronic whips. He found himself backing against the wall.

HE WHIRLED quickly at the small sound of the opening door to his left. The man who entered was armed and uniformed, but there was a girl with him. He relaxed a bit. At another time, he might have observed the girl closely, since she was worth observation and approval, but at the moment she was only a girl.

They approached together, stopping some six feet away. He kept his eye on the guard's blaster.

The girl said to the guard, "I'll speak to him first, lieutenant."

There was a little vertical line between her eyes, as she turned to him. She said, "Are you the man who has this story of an assassination plot against the Director?"

Biron said, "I was told I would see the Director."

"That is impossible. If you have anything to say, say it to me. If your information is truthful and useful, you will be well-treated."

"May I ask who you are? How do I know you are authorized to speak for the Director?"

The girl seemed annoyed. "I am his daughter. Please answer my questions. Are you from outside the System?"

"I am from Earth." Biron paused, then added, "Your Grace."

The addition pleased her. "Where is that?"

"It is a small planet of the Sirian sector, your Grace."

"And what is your name?"

"Biron Malaine, your Grace."

She stared at him thoughtfully. "From Earth? Can you pilot a spaceship?"

Biron almost smiled. She was testing him. She knew very well that space-navigation was one of the forbidden sciences in the Tyranni-controlled worlds.

He said, "Yes, your Grace." He could prove that when the performance test came, *if* they let him live that long. Space-navigation was not a forbidden science on Earth, and in four years one could learn much.

She said, "Very well. And your story?"

He made his decision suddenly. To the guard alone, he would not have dared. But this was a girl,

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and if she was not lying, if she really *was* the Director's daughter, she might be a persuasive factor on his behalf.

He said, "There is no assassination plot, your Grace."

The girl was startled. She turned impatiently to her companion. "Would you take over, lieutenant? Get the truth out of him."

Biron took a step forward and met the cold thrust of the guard's blaster. He said, urgently, "Wait, your Grace. Listen to me! It was the only way to see the Director. Don't you understand?"

He raised his voice and sent it after her retreating form: "Will you tell his Excellency, at least, that I am Biron Farrill and claim my Sanctuary Right?"

It was a feeble straw at which to clutch. The old feudal customs had been losing their force with the generations even before the Tyranni came. Now they were archaisms. But there was nothing else. Nothing.

SHE turned, and her eyebrows were arched. "Are you claiming now to be of the aristocratic order? A moment ago, your name was Malaine."

A new voice sounded unexpectedly. "So it was, but it is the second name which is correct. You are Biron Farrill indeed, my good sir. Of course you are. The resemblance is unmistakable."

A small, smiling man stood in the doorway. His eyes, widely spaced and brilliant, were taking in all of Biron with an amused sharpness. He cocked his narrow face upward at Biron's height and said to the girl, "Don't you recognize him, too, Artemisia?"

Artemisia hurried to him, her voice troubled. "Uncle Gil, what are you doing here?"

"Taking care of my interests, Artemisia. Remember that if there were an assassination, I would be the closest of the Hinriads to the possible succession." Gillbret oth Hinriad winked elaborately, then added, "Oh, get the lieutenant out of here. There isn't any danger."

She ignored that and said, "Have you been sounding the communicator again?"

"Of course. Would you deprive me of an amusement? It is pleasant to eavesdrop on them."

"Not if they catch you."

"The danger is part of the game, my dear. The amusing part. After all, the Tyranni do not hesitate to sound the Palace. We can't do much without *their* knowing. Well, turnabout, you know. Aren't you going to introduce me?"

"No, I'm not," she said, shortly. "This is none of your business."

"Then *I'll* introduce *you*. When I heard his name, I stopped listening and came in." He moved past Artemisia, stepped up to Biron, inspected him with an impersonal smile, and said, "This is Biron Farrill."

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"I have said so myself," said Biron. More than half his attention was upon the lieutenant, who still held his neuronic whip in firing position.

"But you have not added that you are the son of the Rancher of Widemos."

"I would have, but for your interruption. In any case, you've got the story now. Obviously, I had to get away from the Tyranni and that without giving them my real name." Biron waited. This was it, he felt. If the next move was not an immediate arrest, there was still a trifling chance.

Artemisia said, "I see. This *is* a matter for the Director then. You are sure there is no plot?"

"None, your Grace."

"Good. Uncle Gil, will you remain with Mr. Farrill? Lieutenant, come with me."

Biron felt weak. He would have liked to sit down, but no suggestion to that effect was made by Gillbret, who still inspected him with an almost clinical interest.

"The Rancher's son! Amusing!"

Biron brought his attention downward. He was tired of cautious monosyllables and careful phrases. He said, abruptly, "Yes, the Rancher's son. It is a congenital situation. Can I help you in any other way?"

GILLBRET showed no offense. His thin face merely creased further as his smile widened. He said, "You might satisfy my curiosity. You really came for Sanctuary? Here?"

"I'd rather discuss that with the Director, sir."

"Oh, get off it, young man. You'll find that very little business can be done with the Director. Why do you suppose you had to deal with his daughter just now? That's an amusing thought, if you'll consider it."

"Do you find everything amusing?"

"Why not? As an attitude toward life, it's an amusing one. It's the only adjective that will fit. Observe the universe, young man. If you can't force amusement out of it, you might as well cut your throat, since there's damned little good in it. I haven't introduced myself, by the way. I'm the Director's cousin."

Biron said coldly, "Congratulations."

Gillbret shrugged. "You're right. It's not impressive. And I'm likely to remain just that indefinitely since there is no assassination to be expected, after all."

"Unless you whip one up for yourself."

"My dear sir, your sense of humor! You'll have to get used to the fact that nobody takes *me* seriously. My remark was only an expression of cynicism. You don't suppose the Directorship is worth anything these days, do you? Surely you cannot believe that Hinrik

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was always like this. He was never a great brain, but with every year he becomes more impossible. I forget, you haven't seen him yet. But you will! I hear him coming. When he speaks to you, remember that he is the ruler of the largest of the Trans-Nebular kingdoms. It will be an amusing thought."

Hinrik bore his dignity with the ease of experience. He acknowledged Biron's painstakingly ceremonious bow with the proper degree of condescension. He said, showing a trace of abruptness, "And your business with us, sir?"

Artemisia was standing at her father's side, and Biron noticed, with some surprise, that she was quite pretty. He said, "Your Excellency, I have come on behalf of my father's good name. You must know his execution was unjust."

Hinrik looked away. "I knew your father slightly. He was in Rhodia once or twice." He paused, and his voice quavered a bit. "You are very like him. Very. But he was tried, you know. At least I imagine he was. And according to law. Really, I don't know the details."

"Exactly, your Excellency. But I would like to learn those details. I am sure that my father was no traitor."

HINRIK broke in hurriedly, "As his son, of course, it is understandable that you should defend your father, but, really, it is difficult to discuss such matters of state now. Highly irregular, in fact, Why don't you see Aratap?"

"I do not know him, Excellency."

"Aratap? The Commissioner? The Tyrannian Commissioner?"

"I have seen him and he sent me here. Surely, you understand that I dare not let the Tyranni—"

But Hinrik had grown stiff. His hand had wandered to his lips, as though to keep them from trembling and his words were consequently muffled. "Aratap sent you?"

"I found it necessary to tell him—"

"Don't repeat what you told him; I know," said Hinrik. "I can do nothing for you, Rancher—uh—Mr. Farrill. It is not in my jurisdiction alone. The Executive Council—stop pulling at me, Arta. How can I pay attention to matters when you distract me?—must be consulted. Gillbret! Will you see that Mr. Farrill is taken care of? I will do what can be done. Yes, I will consult the Executive Council. The forms of law, you know. Very important. Very important."

He turned on his heel, mumbling.

Artemisia lingered for a moment, and touched Biron's sleeve. "A moment. Was it true, your statement that you could pilot a spaceship?"

"Quite true," said Biron. He smiled at her and after a moment's hesitation, she smiled briefly in return.

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"Gillbret," she said, "I want to speak to you later."

She hurried off. Biron looked after her, till Gillbret tweaked at his sleeve.

"I presume you are hungry, perhaps thirsty, would like a wash?" asked Gillbret. "The ordinary amenities of life continue, I take it?"

"Thank you, yes," said Biron. The tension had almost entirely washed out of him. For a moment, he was relaxed and felt wonderful. She *was* pretty. *Very* pretty.

Hinrik, on the other hand, was not relaxed. In his own chambers, his thoughts whirled at a feverish pace. Try as he might, he could not wriggle out of the inevitable conclusion. It was a trap! Aratap had sent him and it was a trap!

He buried his head in his hands to quiet and deaden the pounding, and then he knew what he *had* to do.

CHAPTER VII

Musician of the Mind

NIGHT settles in time on all habitable planets. Not always, perhaps, at respectable intervals, since recorded periods of rotation vary from fifteen to fifty-two hours. That fact requires the most strenuous psychological adjustment for those traveling from planet to planet.

On many planets, such adjustments are made and the waking-sleeping periods are tailored to fit. On many more, the almost universal use of conditioned atmospheres and artificial lighting makes the day-night question secondary, except insofar as it modifies agriculture. On a few planets—those of the extremes—arbitrary divisions are made which ignore the trivial facts of light and dark.

But always, whatever the social conventions, the coming of night has a deep and abiding psychological significance, dating back to Man's pre-human arboreal existence. Night will always be a time of fear and insecurity, and the heart will sink with the Sun.

Inside Palace Central, there was no sensory mechanism by which one could tell the coming of night, yet Biron felt that coming through some indefinite instinct hidden in the unknown corridors of the human brain. He knew that outdoors, the night's blackness was scarcely relieved by the futile sparks of the stars. He knew that, if it were the right time of year, the jagged "hole in space" known as the Horsehead Nebula, so familiar to all the Trans-Nebular Kingdoms, inked out half the stars that might otherwise have been visible.

And he was depressed again.

He had not seen Artemisia since the little talk with the Director and he found himself resenting that. He had looked forward to dinner; he might have spoken to her. In-

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stead he had eaten alone, with two guards lounging discontentedly just outside the door. Even Gillbret had left him, presumably to eat a less lonely meal in the company one would expect in a palace of the Hinriads.

So that when Gillbret returned and said, "Artemisia and I have been discussing you," he obtained a prompt and interested reaction.

It merely amused him and he said so. "First, however, I want to show you my laboratory," he added. He gestured and the two guards moved off.

"What kind of laboratory?" asked Biron with a definite loss of interest.

"I build gadgets," was the vague response.

IT WAS not a laboratory to the eye. It was more nearly a library, with an ornate desk in the corner.

Biron looked it over slowly. "And you build gadgets here? What kind of gadgets?"

"Well, special sounding devices to spy out the Tyranni spy-beams, in a brand-new way. Nothing *they* can detect. That's how I found out about you, when the first word came through from Aratap. And I have other amusing trinkets. My visi-sonor, for instance. Do you like music?"

"Some kinds."

"Good. I invented an instrument, only I don't know if you can properly call it music." A shelf of book-films slid out and aside at a touch. "This is not really much of a hiding-place, but nobody takes *me* seriously, so they don't look. Amusing, don't you think? But I forget, you're the unamused one."

It was a clumsy, boxlike affair, with that singular lack of gloss and polish that marks the home-made object. One side of it was studded with little gleaming knobs. He put it down with that side upward.

"It isn't pretty," Gillbret said, "but who in Time cares? Put the lights out. No, no! No switches or contacts. Just wish the lights were out. Wish hard! Decide you want them out."

And the lights dimmed with the exception of the faint pearly luster of the ceiling that made them two ghostly faces in the dark. Gillbret laughed lightly at Biron's exclamation.

"Just one of the tricks of my visi-sonor. It's keyed to the mind just as personal message capsules are. Do you know what I mean?"

"No, I don't, if you want a plain answer."

"Well," Gillbret said, "look at it this way. The electric field of your brain cells sets up an induced one in the instrument. Mathematically, it's fairly simple, but as far as I know, no one has ever jammed all the necessary circuits into a box this size before. Usually, it takes a five-story generating plant to do it. It works the other way, too. I can

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close circuits here and impress them directly upon your brain, so that you'll see and hear without any intervention of eyes and ears. Watch!"

There was nothing to watch at first, and then something fuzzy scratched faintly at the corner of Biron's eyes. It became a faint blue-violet ball hovering in mid-air. It followed him as he turned away, remained unchanged when he closed his eyes. And a clear, musical tone accompanied it, was part of it, *was* it.

IT WAS growing and expanding and Biron became disturbingly aware that it existed inside his skull. It wasn't really a color, but rather a colored sound, though without noise. It was tactile, yet without feeling.

It spun and took on an iridescence while the musical tone rose in pitch till it hovered above him like falling silk. Then it exploded so that gouts of color splattered at him in touches that burnt momentarily and left no pain.

Bubbles of rain-drenched green rose again with a quiet, soft moaning. Biron thrust at them in confusion and became aware that he could not see his hands or feel them move. There was nothing, only the little bubbles filling his mind to the exclusion of all else.

He cried out soundlessly and the fantasy ceased. Gillbret was standing before him once again in a lighted room, laughing. Biron felt an acute dizziness and wiped shakily at a chilled, moist forehead. He sat down abruptly.

"What happened?" he demanded, in as stiff a tone as he could manage.

Gillbret said, "*I* don't know. I stayed out of it. You don't understand? It was something your brain had lacked previous experience with. Your brain was sensing directly and it had no method of interpretation for such a phenomenon. So as long as you concentrated on the sensation, your brain could only attempt, futilely, to force the effect into the old, familiar pathways. It attempts separately and simultaneously to interpret it as sight and sound and touch. Were you conscious of an odor, by the way? Sometimes it seemed to me that I smelled the stuff. With dogs I imagine the sensation would be forced almost entirely into odor. I'd like to try it on animals some day.

"On the other hand, if you ignore it, make no attack upon it, it fades away. It's what I do when I want to observe its effects on others, and it isn't difficult."

He placed a little veined hand upon the instrument, fingering the knobs aimlessly. "Sometimes I think that if one could really study this thing, one could compose symphonies in a new medium; do things one could never do with simple sound or sight. I lack the

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capacity for it, I'm afraid. However, just a light touch, not enough to confuse the established mental patterns, is sometimes rather interesting. It heightens perception, releases the psychological censor, accentuates wishful thinking . . . or expectant dread."

He moved the knobs minutely before Biron could object. The moaning now was sweet cerebral music, which, for an instant, threatened to become hollowly menacing before Biron thought of Arta. He thought of her and she was real against the background of the room and Gillbret with the box of dreams in his hand. The music rose to hungry longing more intense than any emotion Biron had ever experienced. She was beautiful and he wanted her. . . .

IT ENDED and she was gone; he still stood with his fists tight and his heart beating in race rhythm. Gillbret looked hastily down at the sono-visor, as though embarrassed by the intensity of Biron's visible yearning. He should have been amused, yet he was not, and Biron, relaxing unhappily, was grateful for that.

"I suppose it could have great therapeutic value," said Gillbret, "by revealing to us our suppressed wishes and fears—"

"I'd like to ask you a question," Biron said, abruptly.

"By all means."

"Why don't you put your scientific ability to worthwhile use instead of—"

"Wasting it on useless toys? I don't know. It may not be entirely useless. This is against the law, you know."

"What is?"

"The visi-sonor. Also my spy devices. If the Tyranni knew, it could easily mean a death sentence."

"Surely, you're joking."

"Not at all. It is obvious that you were brought up on a cattle ranch. The young people cannot even remember what it was like in the old days, I see." Suddenly, his head was to one side and his eyes were narrowed to slits. He asked, "Are you opposed to Tyranni rule? Speak freely. I tell you frankly that *I* am. I tell you also that your father was."

Biron said, calmly, "Yes, I am."

"Why?"

"They are strangers, outlanders. What right have they to rule in Nephelos or in Rhodia?"

"Have you always thought that?"

Biron did not answer.

Gillbret sniffed. "In other words, you decided they were strangers and outlanders only after they executed your father, which, after all, was their simple right. Oh, look, don't fire up. Consider it reasonably. Believe me, I'm on your side. But think! Your father was Rancher. What rights did his herdsmen have? If one of them had stolen cattle for his own use

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or to sell to others, what would have been his punishment? Imprisonment as a thief. If he had plotted the death of your father, for whatever reason, for perhaps a worthy reason in his own eyes, what would have been the result? Execution, undoubtedly. And what right had your father to make laws and visit punishment upon his fellow human beings? *He* was *their* Tyrannian.

"Your father, in his own eyes and in mine, was a patriot. But what of that? To the Tyranni, he was a traitor and they removed him. Can you ignore the necessity of self-defense? The Hinriads have been a bloody lot in their time. Read your history, young man. All governments kill as part of the nature of things.

"So find a better reason to hate the Tyranni. Don't think it is enough to replace one set of rulers by another, that the simple change brings freedom."

BIRON pounded a fist impatiently into his cupped palm. "All this objective philosophy is fine. It is very soothing to the man who lives apart. But what if it had been your father who was murdered?"

"Well, wasn't it? My father was Director before Hinrik and he was killed. Oh, not outright, but subtly. They broke his spirit, as they are breaking Hinrik's now. They wouldn't have *me* as Director when my father died; I was just a little too unpredictable. Hinrik was tall, handsome, and, above all, pliant. Yet not pliant enough, apparently. They hound him continuously, grind him into a pitiful puppet, make sure he cannot even itch without permission. You've seen him. He's deteriorating by the day now. His continual state of fear is pathetically psychopathic. But that, all that, is not why I want to destroy Tyrannian rule."

"No?" said Biron. "You have invented an entirely new reason?"

"An entirely old one, rather. The Tyranni are destroying the right of twenty billion human beings to take part in the development of the race. You've been to school. You've learned the economic cycle. A new planet is settled," he was ticking the points off on his fingers, "and its first care is to feed itself. It becomes an agricultural world; a herding world. It begins to dig in the ground for crude ore to export, and sends its agricultural surplus abroad to buy luxuries and machinery. That is the second step. Then, as population increases and foreign investments grow, an industrial civilization begins to bud, which is the third step. Eventually, the world becomes mechanized, importing food, exporting machinery, investing in the development of more primitive worlds and so on. The fourth step.

"Always the mechanized worlds are the most thickly populated, the

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most powerful, militarily, since war is a function of machines, and they are usually surrounded by a fringe of agricultural, dependent worlds.

"But what has happened to us? We were at the third step, with a growing industry. And now? That growth has been stopped, frozen, forced to recede. It would interfere with Tyrannian control of our industrial necessities. It is a short-term investment on their part because eventually we'll become unprofitable as we become impoverished. But, meanwhile, they skim the cream.

"Besides, if we industrialized ourselves, we might develop weapons of war. So industrialization is stopped; scientific research is forbidden. And eventually the people become so used to that, they lack the realization even that anything is missing. So that you are surprised when I tell you that I could be executed for building a visisonor.

"OF COURSE, some day we will beat the Tyranni. It is fairly certain. They can't rule forever. No one can. They'll grow soft and lazy. They will intermarry and lose much of their separate traditions. They will become corrupt. But it may take centuries, because history doesn't hurry. And when those centuries have passed, we will still all be agricultural worlds with no industrial or scientific heritage to speak of, while our neighbors on all sides, those not under Tyrannian control, will be strong and urbanized. The Kingdoms will be semi-colonial areas indefinitely. They may *never* catch up and we may be merely observers in the great drama of human advance."

Biron said, "What you say is not completely unfamiliar."

"Naturally, if you were educated on Earth. Earth occupies a very peculiar position in social development."

"Indeed?"

"To be sure. All the Galaxy has been in a continuous state of expansion since the first discovery of interstellar travel. We have always been a growing society, therefore an immature society. It is obvious that that human society reached maturity in only one place and in only one time and that this was on Earth immediately prior to its catastrophe. There we had a society which had temporarily lost all possibility for geographical expansion and was therefore faced with such problems as overpopulation, depletion of resources and so on; problems that have never faced any other portion of the Galaxy.

"They were *forced* to study the social sciences intensively. We have lost much or all of that and it is a pity. Now here's an amusing thing. When Hinrik was a young man, he was a great Primitivist. He had a library on things Earthly that was unparalleled in the Galaxy. Since

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he became Director, that's gone by the board along with everything else. But, in a way, I've inherited it. Their literature, such scraps as survive, is fascinating. It has a peculiarly introspective flavor to it that we don't have in our extroverted Galactic civilization. It is *most* amusing."

Biron said, "You relieve me. You have been serious for so long that I began to wonder if you had lost your sense of humor."

Gillbret shrugged. "I am relaxing and it is wonderful. First time in months, I think. Do you know what it is to play a part? To split your personality deliberately for twenty-four hours a day? Even when with friends? Even when alone, so that you will never forget inadvertently? To be eternally amused? To be of no account? To be so effete and faintly ridiculous that you have convinced all who know you of your own worthlessness? All so that your life might be safe, even though it means it has become barely worth living. But even so, once in a while, I can fight them."

HE LOOKED up, and his voice was earnest, almost pleading. "You can pilot a ship. I cannot. Isn't that strange? You talk about my scientific ability, yet I cannot pilot a simple one-man spacegig. But you can, and it follows then that you must leave Rhodia."

There was no mistaking the pleading, but Biron frowned coldly. "Why?"

Gillbret continued, speaking rapidly, "As I said, Artemisia and I have discussed you and arranged this. When you leave here, proceed directly to her room, where she is waiting for you. I have drawn a diagram so that you won't have to ask your way through the corridors." He was forcing a small sheet of metallene upon Biron. "If anyone does stop you, say that you have been summoned by the Director, and proceed. There will be no trouble, if you show no uncertainty—"

"Hold on!" said Biron. He was not going to do it again. Jonti had chivied him to Rhodia and, consequently, succeeded in bringing him before the Tyranni. The Tyrannian Commissioner had then chivied him to Palace Central before he could feel his own secret way there and, consequently, subjected him, nakedly unprepared, to the whims of an unsteady puppet. But that was all! His moves, henceforward, might be severely limited, but, by Space and Time, they would be his own. He felt very stubborn about it.

He said, "I'm here on what is important business to me, sir. I'm not leaving."

"What? Don't be a young idiot." For a moment, the old Gillbret was showing through. "Do you think you will accomplish anything here? Do you think you will get

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out of the Palace alive if you let the morning sun rise? Why, Hinrik will call in the Tyranni and you will be imprisoned within twenty-four hours. He is only waiting this while because it takes him so long to make up his mind to do anything. He is my cousin. I know him, I tell you."

Biron said, "And if so, what is that to you? Why should you be so concerned about me?" He was *not* going to be chivied. He would never again be another man's obedient marionette.

But Gillbret was standing, staring at him. "I want you to take me with you. I'm concerned about myself. I cannot endure life under the Tyranni any longer. It is only that neither Artemisia nor I can handle a ship or we would have left long ago. It's our lives, too."

Biron felt a certain weakening of his resolve. "The Director's daughter? What has she to do with this?"

"I BELIEVE that she is the most desperate of us. There is a special death for women. What should be ahead of a Director's daughter who is young, personable, and unmarried, but to become young, personable and married? And who, in these days, should be the delightful groom? Why, an old, lecherous Tyrannian court functionary who has buried three wives and wishes to revive the fires of his youth with a young girl."

"Surely the Director would never allow such a thing."

"The Director will allow anything. Nobody waits upon his permission."

Biron thought of Artemisia as he had last seen her. Her hair had been combed back from her forehead and allowed to fall in simple straightness, with a single inward wave at shoulder level. Tanned skin, black eyes, red lips. Tall, young, smiling. Probably the description of a hundred million girls throughout the Galaxy. It would be ridiculous to let that sway him.

Yet he said, "Is there a ship ready?"

Gillbret's face wrinkled under the impact of a sudden smile. But before he could say a word, there came a pounding at the door. It was no gentle interruption of the photo-beam, no soft sound of polite knuckles on hard plastic. It was the clang of metal, the overpowering thunder of the weapon of authority.

It was repeated, and Gillbret said, "You'd better open the door."

Biron did so, and two uniforms were in the room. The foremost saluted Gillbret with abrupt efficiency, then turned to Biron: "Biron Farrill, in the name of the Resident Commissioner of Tyrann and of the Director of Rhodia, I place you under arrest."

"On what charge?"

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"High treason."

A look of infinite loss twisted Gillbret's face. He looked away. "Hinrik was quick this once; quicker than I had ever expected. An amusing thought!"

He was the old Gillbret, smiling and indifferent, eyebrows a little raised, as though inspecting a distasteful fact with a faint tinge of regret.

"Very amusing," he said.

"Please follow me," said the guard, and Biron was aware of the neuronic whip resting easily in the other's hand.

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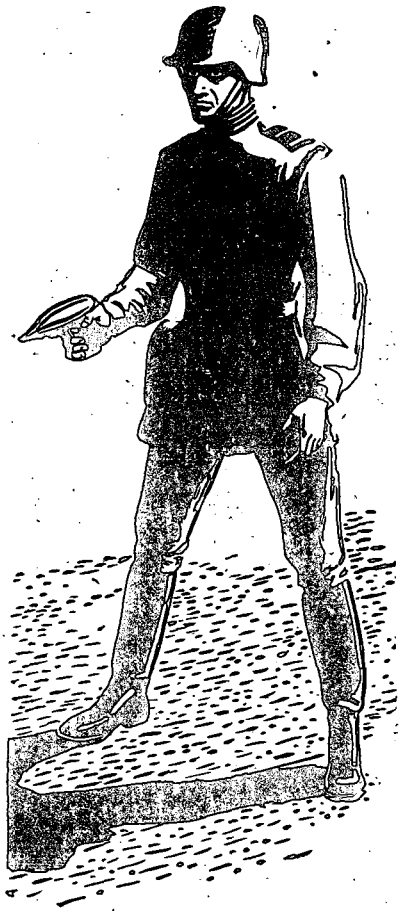
CHAPTER VIII

A Lady's Skirts



BIRON'S throat was growing dry. He could have beaten either of the guards in fair fight. He knew that and he itched for the chance. He might even have made a satisfactory showing against both together. But they had the whips and he couldn't have lifted an arm without having them paralyze it instantly. Inside his mind, he surrendered. There was no other way.

But Gillbret said, "Let him take his cloak, men."

Biron, startled, looked quickly toward the little man and retracted his mental surrender. He had not brought a cloak.

The guard whose weapon was out d his heels as a gesture of respect. He motioned his whip at Biron. "You heard Milord. Get your cloak and make it quick."

Biron stepped back as slowly as he dared. He retreated to the bookcase and squatted, groping behind the chair for his non-existent cloak. And as his fingers clawed at the empty space behind the chair, he waited tensely for Gillbret.

The sono-visor was just a queer knobbed object to the guards. It would mean nothing to them that Gillbret fingered the knobs gently. Biron watched the muzzle of the whip intensely and allowed it to fill his mind. Certainly nothing

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else he saw or heard (*thought* he saw or heard) must enter.

But how much longer?

The armed guard said, "Is your cloak behind that chair? Stand up!" He took an impatient step forward, and then stopped. His eyes narrowed in deep amazement and he looked sharply at his left.

That was it! Biron hunched and threw himself forward at the guard's knees. The guard went down with a jarring thud, and Biron's large fist closed over the other's hand, grasping for the neuronic whip it held.

The other guard had his weapon out, but for the moment he was useless. With his free hand, he was brushing wildly at the space before his eyes.

Gillbret's high-pitched laugh sounded. "Anything bothering you, Farrill?"

"Don't see a thing," Biron grunted, "except this whip I've got now."

"All right, leave then. They can't do anything to stop you. Their minds are full of sights and sounds that don't exist." Gillbret skipped out of the way of the writhing tangle of bodies.

Biron wrenched his arms free and heaved upward. He brought his arm down solidly just below the other's ribs. The guard's face twisted in agony and his body doubled convulsively. Biron rose, whip in hand.

"Careful," cried Gillbret.

BUT Biron did not turn quickly enough. The second guard was bearing him down again. It was a blind attack. What it was that the guard thought he was grasping, it was impossible to tell. That he knew nothing of Biron at the moment was certain. His breath rasped in Biron's ear and there was a continuous incoherent gurgle bubbling in his throat.

Biron twisted in an attempt to bring his captured weapon into play and was frighteningly aware of the blank and empty eyes that must be staring at some horror invisible to anyone else.

Biron braced his legs and shifted weight in an effort to break loose, quite uselessly. Three times he felt the guard's whip flung hard against his hip, and flinched at the contact.

And then the guard's gurgle dissolved into words. He yelled, "I'll get you all!" and the very pale, almost-invisible shimmer of the ionized air in the path of the whip's energy beam made its frightening appearance. It swept wide through the air, and the path of the beam intersected Biron's foot.

It was as though he had stepped into a bath of boiling lead. Or as if a granite block had toppled upon it. Or as if it had been crunched off by a shark. Actually nothing had happened to it physically. It was only that the nerve endings that governed the sensation of pain had been universally and maximally

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stimulated. Boiling lead could have done no more.

Biron's yell tore his throat raw, and he collapsed. It did not even occur to him that the fight was over. Nothing mattered but the ballooning pain.

Yet, though Biron did not know it, the guard's grip had relaxed, and minutes later, when the young man could force his eyes open and blink away the tears, he found the guard backed against the wall, pushing feebly at nothing with both hands and giggling to himself. The first guard was still on his back, arms and legs spread-eagled now. He was conscious, but silent. His eyes were following something in an erratic path, and his body quivered a little. There was a little froth on his lips.

Biron forced himself to his feet. He limped badly as he made his way to the wall. He used the butt of the whip and the guard slumped. Then back to the first, who made no defense either, his eyes moving silently to the very moment of unconsciousness.

Biron sat down again, nursing his foot. He stripped shoe and stocking from it, and stared in surprise at the unbroken skin. He chafed it and grunted at the burning sensation. He looked up at Gillbret, who had put down his visi-sonor and was now rubbing one lean cheek with the back of his hand.

"Thank you," said Biron, "for the help of your instrument."

Gillbret shrugged. "There'll be more here soon. Get to Artemisia's room. Please! Quickly!"

Biron realized the justice of that. His foot had subsided to a quiet quiver of pain, but it felt swollen and puffy. He put on a stocking and tucked the shoe under his elbow. He already had one whip, and he relieved the second guard of the other. He stuffed it precariously within his belt.

He turned at the door and asked with a sense of crawling revulsion, "What did you make them see?"

"I don't know. I can't control it. I just gave them all the power I could and the rest depended on their own psychological makeup. Please don't stand there talking. Do you have the map of Artemisia's room?"

BIRON nodded, and set off down the corridor. It was empty. He could not walk quickly, since trying to do so made his walk a hobble.

He looked at his watch, then remembered that he had somehow never had the time to adjust it to Rhodian local chronometry. It still ran on Standard Interstellar Time as used aboard ship, where one hundred minutes made an hour and a thousand a day. So the figure "876" which gleamed pinkly on the cool metal face of the watch meant nothing now.

Still, it had to be well into the night, or into the planetary sleep-

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ing-period, at any rate (supposing the two not to coincide), as otherwise the halls would not be so empty and the bas-reliefs on the wall would not phosphoresce unwatched. He touched one idly as he passed, a coronation scene, and found it to be two-dimensional. Yet it gave the perfect illusion of standing out from the wall.

It was sufficiently unusual for him to stop momentarily in order to examine the effect. Then he remembered and hurried on.

THE emptiness of the corridor struck him as another sign of the decadence of Rhodia. He had grown conscious of these symbols of decline now that he had become a rebel. As the center of an independent power, the Palace would always have had its sentries and its quiet wardens of the night.

He consulted Gillbret's crude map and turned to the right, moving up a wide, curving ramp. There might have been processions here once, but nothing of that would be left now.

He leaned against the proper door and touched the photo-signal. The door moved ajar a bit, then opened wide.

"Come in, young man."

It was Artemisia. Biron slipped inside and the door closed swiftly and silently. He looked at the girl, saying nothing. He was gloomily conscious of the fact that his shirt was torn at the shoulder so that one sleeve flapped loosely, that his clothes were grimy and his face welted. He remembered the shoe he was still carrying, dropped it and wriggled his foot into it.

Then he said, "Mind if I sit down?"

She followed him to the chair, and stood before him, a little annoyed. "What happened? What's wrong with your foot?"

"I hurt it," he said, shortly. "Are you ready to leave?"

She brightened. "You'll take us, then?"

But Biron was in no mood to be sweet about it. His foot still twinged and he cradled it. He said, "Look, get me out to a ship. I'm leaving this damn planet. If you want to come along, I'll take you."

She frowned, "You might be more pleasant about it. Were you in a fight?"

"Yes, I was. With your father's guards, who wanted to arrest me for treason. So much for my Sanctuary Right."

"Oh! I'm sorry."

"I'm a lot sorrier. It's no wonder the Tyranni can lord it over fifty worlds with a handful of men. We help them. Men like your father would do anything to keep in power; they would forget the basic duties of a simple gentleman—Oh, forget it!"

"I said I was sorry, Lord Rancher." She used the title with a cold pride. "Please don't set yourself up as judge of my father."

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"I'm not interested in discussing it. We'll have to leave in a hurry, before more of your father's precious guards come. Well, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. It's all right." Biron's surliness cancelled out any meaning of his apology, but, damn it, he had never been hit by a neuronic whip before and it *wasn't* fun. And, by Space, they had *owed* him Sanctuary.

Artemisia felt angry. Not at her father, of course, but at the stupid young man. He was so young, practically a child, she decided, scarcely older than herself, if that.

The Communicator sounded and she said, sharply, "Please wait a minute and we'll go."

IT WAS Gillbret's voice, sounding faintly. "Arta? All right at your end?"

"He's here," she whispered back.

"Fine, fine. Don't say anything. Just listen. Don't leave your room. Keep him there. There's going to be a search of the Palace, which there's no way of stopping. I'll try to think of something, but, meanwhile, *don't move*." He waited for no reply. Contact was broken.

"So that's that," said Biron. He had heard, also. "Shall I stay and get you into trouble, or shall I go out and give myself up? There's no reason to expect Sanctuary anywhere on Rhodia, I suppose."

She faced him in a rage, crying in a choked whisper, "Oh, shut up, you big, ugly fool."

They glared at each other, Biron standing on one foot and raging. In a way, he was trying to help her, too. "There is no reason for you to be insulting," he told her, just barely controlling his anger.

She said, "I'm sorry," and looked away.

"I meant your tone of voice, not what you said. You're entitled to your opinion of me."

"You don't have to say the things you do about my father. You don't know what being Director is like. He's working for his people, whatever you may think."

"Oh, sure. He has to sell me to the Tyranni for the sake of the people. That makes sense."

"Certainly it does. He has to show them he's loyal. Otherwise, they might depose him and take over the direct rule of Rhodia. Would that be better?"

"If a noble... can't find Sanctuary—"

"Oh, you think only of yourself. That's what's wrong with you."

"I don't think it's particularly selfish not to want to die. At least for nothing. I've got some fighting to do before I go. *My* father fought them." He knew he was beginning to sound melodramatic, but she affected him that way.

She said, "And what good did it do your father?"

"None, I suppose. He was killed."

Artemisia felt unhappy. "I keep saying I'm sorry, and this time I

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really mean it. I'm all upset." Then, in defense, "I'm in trouble, too."

Biron remembered. "I know. All right, let's start all over." He tried to smile. His foot was feeling better anyway.

She said, in an attempt at lightness, "You're not *really* ugly."

Biron felt foolish. "Oh, I don't know—"

Then he stopped, and Artemisia's hand flew to her mouth.

There was the sudden, soft sound of many ordered feet on the semi-elastic plastic mosaic that floored the corridor outside. Most passed by, but there was a faint, disciplined heel-clicking just outside the door, and the night signal purred.

GILLBRET had to work quickly. *Damn* Hinrik for making up his mind so quickly this once, for not waiting till morning. Gillbret *had* to get away; he might never have another chance. But he had to hide his sono-visor. For the first time, he wished he had a better hiding-place.

Then he called the captain of the guard. He couldn't very well neglect a little matter of two unconscious guards and an escaped prisoner.

The captain of the guard was grim about it. He had the two unconscious men cleared out, and then faced Gillbret.

"My Lord, I am not quite clear from your message exactly what happened," he said.

"Just what you see," said Gillbret. "They came to make their arrest, and the young man did not submit. He is gone, Space knows where."

"That is of little moment, my Lord," said the captain. "The Palace is honored tonight with the presence of a personage, so it is well-guarded despite the hour. He cannot get out and we will draw the net through the interior. But *how* did he escape? My men were armed. He was not."

"He fought like a tiger. From that chair, behind which I hid—"

"I am sorry, my Lord, that you did not think to aid my men against an accused traitor."

Gillbret looked scornful. "What an amusing thought, captain. When your men, with doubled advantage in numbers and weapons, need help from myself, it is time that you recruited yourself other men."

"Very well. We will search the Palace, find him, and see if he can repeat the performance."

"I shall accompany you, captain."

It was the captain's turn to raise his eyebrows. He said, "I would not advise it, my Lord. There would be some danger."

It was the kind of remark that one did not make to a Hinriad. Gillbret knew that, but he only smiled and let the wrinkles fill his lean face. "I know that," he said, "but occasionally I find even danger amusing."

It took five minutes for the com-

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pany of guards to assemble. Gillbret, alone in his room during that time, called Artemisia.

BIRON and Artemisia had frozen at the purring of the little signal. It sounded a second time and then there was the cautious rap upon the door, and Gillbret's voice was heard.

"Do let me try, captain," it said. Then, more loudly, "Artemisia?"

Biron grinned his relief and took a step forward, but the girl put a sudden hand upon his mouth. She called out, "One moment, Uncle Gil," and pointed desperately toward the wall.

Biron could only stare stupidly. The wall was quite blank. Artemisia shook her head impatiently and stepped quickly past him. Her hand on the wall caused a portion of it to slide noiselessly aside, revealing a dressing room. Her lips motioned, "Get inside!" and her hands were fumbling at the ornamental pin at her right shoulder. The unclasping of that pin broke the tiny biostatic force-field that held an invisible seam tightly closed down the length of the dress. She stepped out of it.

Biron turned around after walking through what had been the wall, and its closing lasted just long enough for him to see her pulling a white-furred dressing gown around her proud body. The scarlet dress lay crumpled upon the chair.

He looked about him and wondered if they would search Artemisia's room. He was helpless if a search took place. There was no way out of the dressing-room but the way he had entered.

Along one wall there hung a row of gowns, and the air shimmered very faintly before it. His hand passed easily through the shimmer, with only a faint tingling where it crossed his wrist, but then it was meant to repel only dust so that the space behind it could be kept aseptically clean.

He might hide behind the skirts. It was what he was doing, really. He had manhandled two guards, with Gillbret's help, to get here, but now that he was here, he was hiding behind a lady's skirts. A Lady's skirts, in fact.

Incongruously, he found himself wishing he had turned a bit sooner before the wall had closed behind him. She had quite a remarkable figure. It was ridiculous of him to have been so childishly nasty a while back. Of course, she was not to blame for the faults of her father.

And now he could only wait, staring at the blank wall; waiting for the sound of feet within the room, for the wall to pull back once more, for the muzzles facing him again, this time without a sono-visor to help him.

—ISAAC ASIMOV

CONTINUED NEXT MONTH

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Dark Interlude

By MACK REYNOLDS and FREDRIC BROWN

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Justifiable homicide is a solidly established point of law, but the justification of murder depends on where the killer lives...and when!

SHERIFF BEN RAND'S eyes were grave. He said, "Okay, boy. You feel kind of jittery; that's natural. But if your story's straight, don't worry. Don't worry about nothing. Everything'll be all right, boy."

"It was three hours ago, Sheriff," Allenby said. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get into town and that I had to wake you up. But Sis was hysterical a while. I had to try and quiet her down, and then I had trouble starting the jalopy."

"Don't worry about waking me up, boy. Being sheriff's a full-time job. And it ain't late, anyway; I just happened to turn in early tonight. Now let me get a few things straight. You say your name's Lou Allenby. That's a good name in these parts, Allenby. You kin of

Illustrated by DAVID MAUS

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Rance Allenby, used to run the feed business over in Cooperville? I went to school with Rance . . . Now about the fella who said he come from the future . . ."

* * *

THE Presidor of the Historical Research Department was skeptical to the last. He argued, "I am still of the opinion that the project is not feasible. There are paradoxes involved which present insurmountable—"

Doctr Matthe, the noted physicist, interrupted politely, "Undoubtedly, sir, you are familiar with the Dichotomy?"

The presidor wasn't, so he remained silent to indicate that he wanted an explanation.

"Zeno propounded the Dichotomy. He was a Greek philosopher of roughly five hundred years before the ancient prophet whose birth was used by the primitives to mark the beginning of their calendar. The Dichotomy states that it is impossible to cover any given distance. The argument: First, half the distance must be traversed, then half of the remaining distance, then again half of what remains, and so on. It follows that some portion of the distance to be covered always remains, and therefore motion is impossible."

"Not analagous," the presidor objected. "In the first place, your Greek assumed that any totality composed of an infinite number of parts must, itself, be infinite, whereas we know that an infinite number of elements make up a finite total. Besides—"

Matthe smiled gently and held up a hand. "Please, sir, don't misunderstand me. I do not deny that today we understand Zeno's paradox. But believe me, for long centuries the best minds the human race could produce could not explain it."

The presidor said tactfully, "I fail to see your point, Doctr Matthe. Please forgive my inadequacy. What possible connection has this Dichotomy of Zeno's with your projected expedition into the past?"

"I was merely drawing a parallel, sir. Zeno conceived the paradox proving that it was impossible to cover any distance, nor were the ancients able to explain it. But did that prevent them from covering distances? Obviously not. Today, my assistants and I have devised a method to send our young friend here, Jan Obreen, into the distant past. The paradox is immediately pointed out—suppose he should kill an ancestor or otherwise change history? I do not claim to be able to explain how this apparent paradox is overcome in time travel; all I know is that time travel *is* possible. Undoubtedly, better minds than mine will one day resolve the paradox, but until then we shall continue to utilize time travel, paradox or not."

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Jan Obreen had been sitting, nervously quiet, listening to his distinguished superiors. Now he cleared his throat and said, "I believe the hour has arrived for the experiment."

The presidor shrugged his continued disapproval, but dropped the conversation. He let his eyes scan doubtfully the equipment that stood in the corner of the laboratory.

Matthe shot a quick glance at the time piece, then hurried last minute instructions to his student.

"We've been all over this before, Jan, but to sum it up—You should appear approximately in the middle of the so-called Twentieth Century; exactly where, we don't know. The language will be Amer-English, which you have studied thoroughly; on that count you should have little difficulty. You will appear in the United States of North America, one of the ancient nations—as they were called—a political division of whose purpose we are not quite sure. One of the designs of your expedition will be to determine why the human race at that time split itself into scores of states, rather than having but one government.

"You will have to adapt yourself to the conditions you find, Jan. Our histories are so vague that we can help you but little in information on what to expect."

The presidor put in, "I am extremely pessimistic about this, Obreen, yet you have volunteered and I have no right to interfere. Your most important task is to leave a message that will come down to us; if you are successful, other attempts will be made to still other periods in history. If you fail—"

"He won't fail," Matthe said.

The presidor shook his head and grasped Obreen's hand in farewell.

Jan Obreen stepped to the equipment and mounted the small platform. He clutched the metal grips on the instrument panel somewhat desperately, hiding to the best of his ability the shrinking inside himself.

* * *

THE sheriff said, "Well, this fella—you say he told you he came from the future?"

Lou Allenby nodded. "About four thousand years ahead. He said it was the year thirty-two hundred and something, but that it was about four thousand years from now; they'd changed the numbering system meanwhile."

"And you didn't figure it was hogwash, *boy? From the way you talked, I got the idea that you kind of believed him."*

The other wet his lips. "I kind of believed him," he said doggedly. "There was something about him; he was different. I don't mean physically, that he couldn't pass for being born now, but there was . . . something different. Kind of, well, like he was at peace with himself;

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gave the impression that where he came from everybody was. And he was smart, smart as a whip. And he wasn't crazy, either."

"And what was he doing back here, boy?" The sheriff's voice was gently caustic.

"He was—some kind of student. Seems from what he said that almost everybody in his time was a student. They'd solved all the problems of production and distribution, nobody had to worry about security; in fact, they didn't seem to worry about any of the things we do now." There was a trace of wistfulness in Lou Allenby's voice. He took a deep breath and went on. "He'd come back to do research in our time. They didn't know much about it, it seems. Something had happened in between—there was a bad period of several hundred years—and most books and records had been lost. They had a few, but not many. So they didn't know much about us and they wanted to fill in what they didn't know."

"You believed all that, boy? Did he have any proof?"

* * *

IT WAS the dangerous point; this was where the prime risk lay. They had had, for all practical purposes, no knowledge of the exact contours of the land, forty centuries back, nor knowledge of the presence of trees or buildings. If he appeared at the wrong spot, it might well mean instant death.

Jan Obreen was fortunate; he didn't hit anything. It was, in fact, the other way around. He came out ten feet in the air over a plowed field. The fall was nasty enough, but the soft earth protected him; one ankle seemed sprained, but not too badly. He came painfully to his feet and looked around.

The presence of the field alone was sufficient to tell him that the Matthe process was at least partially successful. He was far before his own age. Agriculture was still a necessary component of human economy, indicating a definitely earlier civilization than his own.

Approximately half a mile away was a densely wooded area; not a park, nor even a planned forest to house the controlled wild life of his time. A haphazardly growing wooded area—almost unbelievable. But, then, he must grow used to the unbelievable; of all the historic periods, this was the least known. Much would be strange.

To his right, a few hundred yards away, was a wooden building. It was, undoubtedly, a human dwelling despite its primitive appearance. There was no use putting it off; contact with his fellow man would have to be made. He limped awkwardly toward his meeting with the Twentieth Century.

The girl had evidently not observed his precipitate arrival, but by the time he arrived in the yard of the farm house, she had come to the door to greet him.

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Her dress was of another age, for in his era the clothing of the feminine portion of the race was not designed to lure the male. Hers, however, was bright and tasteful with color, and it emphasized the youthful contours of her body. Nor was it her dress alone that startled him. There was a touch of color on her lips that he suddenly realized couldn't have been achieved by nature. He had read that primitive women used colors, paints and pigments of various sorts, upon their faces—somehow or other, now that he witnessed it, he was not repelled.

She smiled, the red of her mouth stressing the even whiteness of her teeth. She said, "It would've been easier to come down the road 'stead of across the field." Her eyes took him in, and, had he been more experienced, he could have read interested approval in them.

He said, studiedly, "I am afraid that I am not familiar with your agricultural methods. I trust I have not irrevocably damaged the products of your horticultural efforts."

Susan Allenby blinked at him. "My," she said softly, a distant hint of laughter in her voice, "somebody sounds like maybe they swallowed a dictionary." Her eyes widened suddenly, as she noticed him favoring his left foot. "Why, you've hurt yourself. Now you come right on into the house and let me see if I can't do something about that. Why—"

He followed her quietly, only half hearing her words. Something —something phenomenal—was growing within Jan Obreen, affecting oddly and yet pleasantly his metabolism.

He knew now what Matthe and the presidor meant by paradox.

* * *

THE sheriff said, "Well, you were away when he got to your place—however he got there?"

Lou Allenby nodded. "Yes, that was ten days ago. I was in Miami taking a couple of weeks' vacation. Sis and I each get away for a week or two every year, but we go at different times, partly because we figure it's a good idea to get away from one another once in a while anyway."

"Sure, good idea, boy. But your Sis, she believed this story of where he came from?"

"Yes. And, Sheriff, she had proof. I wish I'd seen it too. The field he landed in was fresh plowed. After she'd fixed his ankle she was curious enough, after what he'd told her, to follow his footsteps through the dirt back to where they'd started. And they ended, or, rather, started, right smack in the middle of a field, with a deep mark like he'd fallen there."

"Maybe he came from an airplane, in a parachute, boy. Did you think of that?"

"I thought of that, and so did Sis. She says that if he did he must've swallowed the parachute.

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She could follow his steps every bit of the way—it was only a few hundred yards—and there wasn't any place he could've hidden or buried a parachute."

The sheriff said, "They got married right away, you say?"

"Two days later. I had the car with me, so Sis hitched the team and drove them into town—he didn't know how to drive horses—and they got married."

"See the license, boy? You sure they was really—"

Lou Allenby looked at him, his lips beginning to go white, and the sheriff said hastily, "All right, boy, I didn't mean it that way. Take it easy, boy."

* * *

SUSAN had sent her brother a telegram telling him all about it, but he'd changed hotels and somehow the telegram hadn't been forwarded. The first he knew of the marriage was when he drove up to the farm almost a week later.

He was surprised, naturally, but John O'Brien—Susan had altered the name somewhat—seemed likable enough. Handsome, too, if a bit strange, and he and Susan seemed head over heels in love.

Of course, he didn't have any money, they didn't use it in his day, he had told them, but he was a good worker, not at all soft. There was no reason to suppose that he wouldn't make out all right.

The three of them planned, tentatively, for Susan and John to stay at the farm until John had learned the ropes somewhat. Then he expected to be able to find some manner in which to make money—he was quite optimistic about his ability in that line—and spending his time traveling, taking Susan with him. Obviously, he'd be able to learn about the present that way.

The important thing, the all-embracing thing, was to plan some message to get to Doctr Matthe and the presidor. If this type of research was to continue, all depended upon him.

He explained to Susan and Lou that it was a one-way trip. That the equipment worked only in one direction, that there was travel to the past, but not to the future. He was a voluntary exile, fated to spend the rest of his life in this era. The idea was that when he'd been in this century long enough to describe it well, he'd write up his report and put it in a box he'd have especially made to last forty centuries and bury it where it could be dug up—in a spot that had been determined in the future. He had the exact place geographically.

He was quite excited when they told him about the time capsules that had been buried elsewhere. He knew that they had never been dug up and planned to make it part of his report so the men of the future could find them.

They spent their evenings in long conversations, Jan telling of his

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age and what he knew of all the long centuries in between. Of the long fight upward and man's conquests in the fields of science, medicine and in human relations. And they telling him of theirs, describing the institutions, the ways of life which he found so unique.

Lou hadn't been particularly happy about the precipitate marriage at first, but he found himself warming to Jan. Until . . .

* * *

THE sheriff said, "And he didn't tell you what he was till this evening?"

"That's right."

"Your sister heard him say it? She'll back you up?"

"I . . . I guess she will. She's upset now, like I said, kind of hysterical. Screams that she's going to leave me and the farm. But she heard him say it, Sheriff. He must of had a strong hold on her, or she wouldn't be acting the way she is."

"Not that I doubt your word, boy, about a thing like that, but it'd be better if she heard it too. How'd it come up?"

"I got to asking him some questions about things in his time and after a while I asked him how they got along on race problems and he acted puzzled and then said he remembered something about races from history he'd studied, but that there weren't any races then.

"He said that by his time—starting after the war of something-or-other, I forget its name—all the races had blended into one. That the whites and the yellows had mostly killed one another off and that Africa had dominated the world for a while, and then all the races had begun to blend into one by colonization and intermarriage and that by his time the process was complete. I just stared at him and asked him, 'You mean you got nigger blood in you?' and he said, just like it didn't mean anything, 'At least one-fourth.'"

"Well, boy, you did just what you had to do," the sheriff told him earnestly, "no doubt about it."

"I just saw red. He'd married Sis; he was sleeping with her. I was so crazy-mad I don't even remember getting my gun."

"Well, don't worry about it, boy. You did right."

"But I feel like hell about it. He didn't know."

"Now that's a matter of opinion, boy. Maybe you swallowed a little too much of this hogwash. Coming from the future—huh! These niggers'll think up the damnedest tricks to pass themself off as white. What kind of proof for his story is that mark on the ground? Hogwash, boy. Ain't nobody coming from the future or going there neither. We can just quiet this up so it won't never be heard of nowhere. It'll be like it never happened."

—MACK REYNOLDS and
FREDRIC BROWN

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RULE OF THREE

Illustrated by KARL ROGERS

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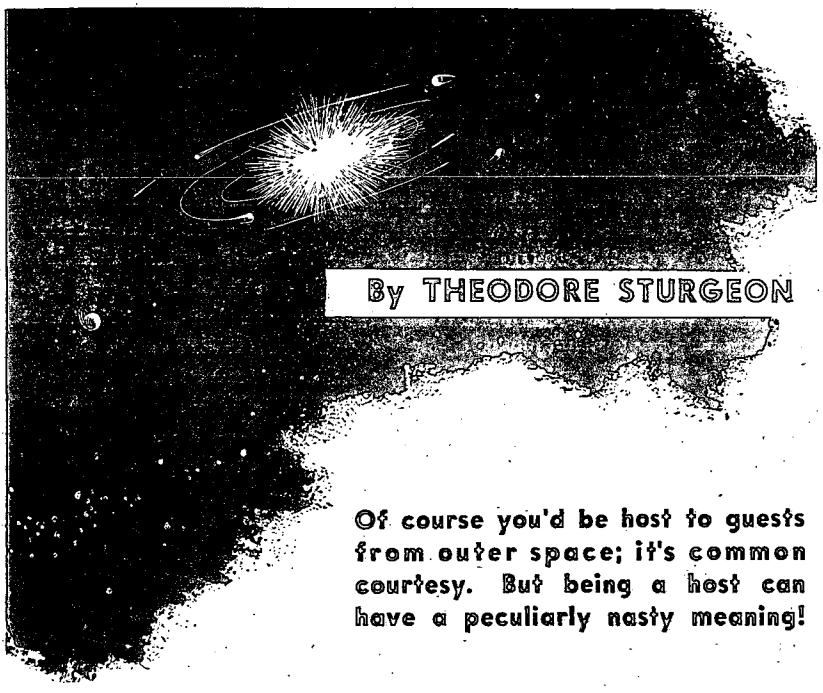

RULE OF THREE

By THEODORE STURGEON

Of course you'd be host to guests from outer space; it's common courtesy. But being a host can have a peculiarly nasty meaning!

THEY were a decontamination squad—three energy-entities (each triple)—on a routine check of a known matter-entity culture. What they traveled in was undoubtedly a ship, since it moved through space, except that it was not a physical structure of metal. It slowed down like a light wave that had suddenly grown tired.

"There it is," said RilRylRul.

The two other triads merged their light-perceptions and observed it. "Out at the edge," said KadKedKud, in satisfaction. "It should not be too difficult to handle out there. When infection spreads near the heart of a Galaxy, it can be troublesome."

MakMykMok cautioned, "Don't underestimate the job until it's surveyed."

"It's a very small sun," said Ril. "Which one of the planets is it? The fourth?"

"No, the greenish-blue one, the third."

"Very well."

In due time the ship—a bubble of binding energy and collapsed, rarefied gas molecules—entered the

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atmosphere. It reshaped itself gradually into a round-nosed, tapered transparency and dropped sharply, heading due west over the planet's equator.

"Busy little things, aren't they?"

As the world turned under them, they watched. They saw the ships, the cities. In the microscopic, intangible fluxes of force which were nerve and sinew and psyche to their triple structure, they stored their observations. They recorded the temperature of steel converters and ships' power plants, calculated the strength of materials of buildings and bridges by their flexure in a simply computed wind velocity, judged and compared the flow-shapes of air and ground vehicles.

"We could return right now," said Kad. "Any race which has progressed this far in such a brief time must be a healthy one. Otherwise how could—"

"Look!" Ril flashed.

THEY watched, appalled. "They are *killing* one another!"

"It must be a ritual," said Kad, "or perhaps a hunt. But we'd better investigate closer."

They dropped down, swiftly overtook a low-flying open-cockpit biplane with a black cross on the fuselage, and settled on the cowling behind the pilot's head. Mak interpenetrated the ship's wall and, treading and passing the air molecules which fled past, reached the pilot's leather helmet at the nape of the neck. Contact was made and broken almost in the same moment of time, and Mak hurtled back in horror to the skin of their ship.

"*Get clear!*" he ordered.

In three microseconds the invisible ship was in the upper atmosphere, with Mak still clinging to the outer skin.

"What was it?"

"Pa'ak, the most vicious, most contagious energy-virus known. That creature is crawling with them! Never have I *seen* such an infestation! Examine me. Irradiate me. Be careful, now—be sure."

It was strong medicine, but effective. Mak weakly permeated through the ship's wall and came inside. "Disgusting. Utterly demoralizing. How can the creature live in that condition?"

"Worse than Murktur III?"

"Infinitely worse. On Murktur I never saw a concentration higher than 14, and that was enough to reduce the natives to permanent bickering. These bipeds can apparently stand a concentration of over 120 on the same scale. Incredible."

"Perhaps that individual is quarantined."

"I doubt it. It was flying its own machine; it can apparently land at will anywhere. But we will check further. Mak, you were quite right," said Ril. "Don't underestimate the job, indeed. Why, with an infestation like that, and a drive like that . . . what couldn't they accomplish if they were clean?"

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They swooped close to the land, barely touched the hair of a child on a hilltop, and soared again, shaken and frightened.

"From what we've seen, that one was no more than 15% of maximum size. How do you read the Pa'ak concentration?"

"Over 70. This place is a pesthole. These creatures must be stopped—and soon. You know how soon such a technology reaches for the stars."

"Shall we send for reinforcements?"

"Before investigating? Certainly not. And after all, there are three of us."

"We shall have to protect ourselves," Ril pointed out.

"You mean—dissociate? Divide our triple selves?"

"You know that's the only way we can remain undetected by the Pa'ak. Of course, once we know exactly how they have developed here, and have analyzed the psychic components of the natives, we can re-synthesize."

"I hate the thought of dividing myself. So weak, so impotent . . ."

"So safe. Don't forget that. Once we've encased ourselves in the minds of these creatures and analyzed them, we'll have to join ourselves again to fight the Pa'ak."

"Yes, indeed. And we'll be together again soon. Take care," added Mak, the cautious one. "The Pa'ak are mindless, but exceedingly dangerous."

"Hungry," Kad supplemented.

"Especially for our kind. Shall we begin?"

The ship disappeared, bursting like a bubble. The three dropped, sharing a wordless thought that was like a handclasp. Then each of them separated into three, and the nine particles drifted down through the atmosphere.

* * *

The news is apples for the unemployed . . . disarmament . . . the Model A Ford.

* * *

A YOUNG girl lay on her stomach under a tree, reading. She yawned widely, choked a little, swallowed, and went back to her book.

Two friends shook hands. Later, one absentmindedly palmed the back of his neck. Something was rubbed into his skin. The other young man scratched his wrist as he walked away.

Something was in the drinking water, though neither the nurse, as she filled the glass, nor the little girl, as she drank, knew of it.

Some dust settled on a toothbrush.

A small boy sank his teeth into his bread-and-jam. The rich, red preserve drooled to the table. The boy put his finger in it, thrust the finger into his mouth.

Another youngster ran through the dewy morning grass in his bare feet.

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Somewhere, two dust motes were waiting their turn.

And a number of years went by.

* * *

The news is Korea and Tibet . . . protein synthesis . . . Aureomycin . . . leaf and grain hormone poisons . . . the McCarran Act.

* * *

There was a character at the party named Irving, and Jonathan Prince, Consulting Psychologist, didn't like him. This Irving played guitar and sang folksongs in a resonant baritone, which was fine; but after that he would put a lampshade on his head and be the "March of the Wooden Soldiers" or some such, and that was as funny, after the fourth viewing, as a rubber crutch. So Jonathan let his eyes wander.

When his gaze came to the dark girl sitting by the door, his breath hissed in suddenly.

Priscilla was sitting next to him. She said "Ouch," and he realized he had squeezed her hand painfully.

"What's the matter, Jon?"

"I just—nothing, Pris." He knew it was tactless, because he knew the sharpness of Priscilla's tilted eyes, but he couldn't help it; he stared back at the dark girl.

The girl's hair was blue-black and gleamed like metal, yet he knew how soft it would be. Her eyes were brown, wide apart, deep. He knew how they would crinkle on the outside ends when she smiled. He knew, as a matter of fact, that she had a small brown mole on the inside of her left thigh.

Irving was still singing. Of course it had to be "Black Is the Color of my True Love's Hair." Priscilla pressed Jon's hand, gently. He leaned toward her.

She whispered, "Who's the charmer? Someone you know?"

He hesitated. Then he nodded and said, without smiling, "My ex-wife."

Priscilla let his hand go.

JONATHAN waited until Irving finished his song and, in the applause, rose. "'Scuse . . ." he muttered. Priscilla didn't seem to be listening.

He crossed the room and stood in front of the dark girl until she looked up at him. He saw the little crinkle by her eyes before he saw the smile.

"Edie."

"Jon! How *are* you?" Then she said, in unison with him, "Can't complain." And she laughed at him.

He flushed, but it was not anger. He sat on the ottoman by her feet. "How've you been, Edie? You haven't changed."

"I haven't," she nodded seriously. There was an echo in his mind. *"We'll always be friends, Jon. Nothing can change that."* Was that what she meant? She said, "Still trying to find out how the human mind works?"

"Yes, on the occasions when I

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find one that does. Are you in town for long?"

"I've come back. They closed the Great Falls office. Jon . . ."

"Yes?"

"Jon, who's the redhead?"

"Priscilla. Priscilla Berg. My assistant."

"She's lovely, Jon. Really lovely. Is she . . . are you . . . ."

At last he could smile. "You can ask, Edie," he said gently. "Here, I'll ask you first. Are you married?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. I don't know why, but I didn't think so. Neither am I."

He looked down at his hands because he knew she was smiling, and somehow he didn't want to look into her eyes and smile too. "I'll get us a drink."

She waited until he was on his feet and a pace away before she said what she used to say: "Come back quickly."

Someone jostled him at the bar.

"What's up, Doc?" said Irving, and nickered. "Hey, that assistant of yours, she drinks scotch, doesn't she?"

"Rye on the rocks," he said absently, and then realized that the scotch suggestion was Irving's shot in the dark, and that he'd given the idiot an opening gambit with Priscilla. He was mildly annoyed as he ordered two Irish-and-waters and went back to Edie.

* * *

Communication was dim and labored.

"We're trapped . . ."

"Don't give up. Ked is very close to me now."

"Yes, you and Ked can achieve proximity. But these creatures won't combine emotionally in threes!"

"They can—they must!"

"Do not force them. Remain encysted and work carefully. Did you know the Pa'ak got Mak?"

"*No!* How horrible! What about Myk and Mok, then?"

"They will be guardians, watchers, communicators. What else can they do?"

"Nothing . . . nothing. How terrible to be one-third dead! What happened to Mak?"

"The creature Mak occupied killed itself, walked in front of a speeding vehicle as Mak tried to synthesize. Mak could not get clear in time from the dead thing."

"We must hurry or these beasts will leap off into space before we join our strength again."

* * *

THE club wouldn't be open for hours yet, but Derek knew which of the long row of herculite doors would be unlocked. He shouldered it open and sidled in, being careful not to let it swing shut on his bass viol.

Someone was playing the piano out back. Piano . . . hadn't Janie been knocking herself out looking for a piano man before he went

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away? He mumbled, "Hope she—" and then Jane was on, over, and all around him.

"Derek, you tall, short underdone yuk, you!" she crooned. She hugged him, and put a scarlet print of her full mouth on his cheek. "Why didn't you wire? God, man, I missed you. Here, put down that Steinway and smooch me once. Am I glad to see your ugly head . . . Look at the man," she demanded of the empty club as he leaned the big bass against the wall and stroked its rounded flank with the tips of his fingers. "Hey, this is me over here."

"How are you, Janie?" He delivered a hug. "What's been giving around here?"

"Me," she said. "Giving, but out. Ma-an . . . a hassel. For ten days I had a sore throat clear from neck to tonsil, carrying that piano man. Damn it, I got a way I sing, and a piano's got to walk around me when I do it. Chopsticks this square makes—*eggs—ack—ly—on the—beat,*" she stressed flatly. "And then a bass player I had, a dog-house complete with dog, and tone-deaf to boot. I booted him. I worked the last three nights without a bass, and am I glad you're back!"

"Me too." He touched her hair. "We'll get you a piano player and everything'll riff like Miff."

"A piano I *got,*" she said, and her voice was awed. "Little cat I heard in a joint after hours. Gives his left hand a push and forgets about it. Right hand is *crazy.* Real sad little character, Derek. Gets the by-himself blues and plays boogie about it. Worse he feels, the better he plays. Sing with him? Man! All his chords are vocal cords for little Janie. He's back there now. Listen at him!"

DEREK listened. The piano back there was talking to itself about something rich and beautiful and lost. "That just one man?" he asked after a moment.

"Come on back and meet him," she said. "Oh, Derek, he's a sweetheart."

"Sweetheart?"

She thumped his chest and chuckled. "Wait till you see him. You don't need to lie awake nights over him. Come on."

He was a man with a hawk face and peaceful eyes. He huddled on the bench watching what his hands did on the keyboard as if he hadn't seen them before but didn't much care. His hands were extraordinarily eloquent. He didn't look up.

Derek said, "I'm going to go get my fiddle."

He did, and picked up the beat so quietly that the pianist didn't hear him for three bars. Then he looked up and smiled shyly at Derek and went on playing. It was very, very good. They volleyed an intro back and forth for a while and then, before Derek fully realized what they were playing, Janie was singing "Thunder and Roses":

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"When you gave me your heart
You gave me the world . . ."

And, after, there was a chord with a tremendous emphasis on an added sixth, and then it was augmented—a hungry, hungry leading tone, which led, with a shocked sort of satisfaction, into silence.

Derek put by his bass, carefully, so it wouldn't make any sound.

Jane said, in a mouselike voice, "I can breathe now?"

The pianist got up. He was not tall. He said, "You're Derek Jax. Thanks for letting me play along with you. I always wanted to."

"Thanks, he says." Derek gestured. "You play a whole mess of piano. What's your name?"

"Henry. Henry Faulkner."

"I never heard of you."

"He was head of the Orchestration Department at the Institute for twelve years," said Jane.

"Hey? That's all right," said Derek. "Symphony stuff. What'd you leave for?"

"Squares," said Henry. To Derek, it was a complete explanation. "I'd like to work here."

Jane closed her eyes and clasped her hands. "Yummy."

Derek said, from a granite face, "No."

JANE stood frozen. Henry came out from behind the piano. He walked—he all but trotted up to Derek. "No? Oh, please! A—joke?"

"No joke. Just no."

Jane breathed, "Derek, what are you on? Goofballs?"

Derek threw up his hands. "No. It's a good word. Ain't 'no' better than a whole lot of yak? No, that's all."

"Derek—"

"Mr. Jax," said Derek.

"Mr. Jax, please think it over," Henry said. "I've been wanting to work with you ever since you recorded 'Slide Down.' You know how long ago that was. I don't just want to play piano someplace. I want to play here—with you. I don't care about the pay. Just let me back up that bass."

"He never talked like that to me," said Jane with a small smile. "You've made yourself a conquest, puddinhead. Now—"

"I don't want to hear that kind of talk," exploded Derek. "I don't want to hear any kind of talk. I said no!"

Jane came to him. She squeezed Henry's forearm and gave him a long look. "Walk around some," she said kindly. "Come back and see me later."

Derek stood looking at the piano. Jane watched Henry go. He walked slowly, holding himself in, his head forward. At the other side of the dance floor he turned and opened his mouth to speak, but Jane waved him on. He went out.

Jane whirled on Derek. "Now what the God—"

Derek interrupted her, rasping,

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"If you got any more to say about this, you can look for a new bass man too."

PALLAS McCORMICK was fifty-three years old and knew what she was about. She strode briskly down Eleventh Street, a swift, narrow figure with pointed shoulders and sharp wattles at the turn of her thin jaw. It was late and the tea room would be closed before long.

Verna was there before her, her bright white hair and bright blue eyes standing out like beacons in the softly lit room.

"Good evening, Pallas." Verna's voice was soft and pillowy, like her pudgy face and figure.

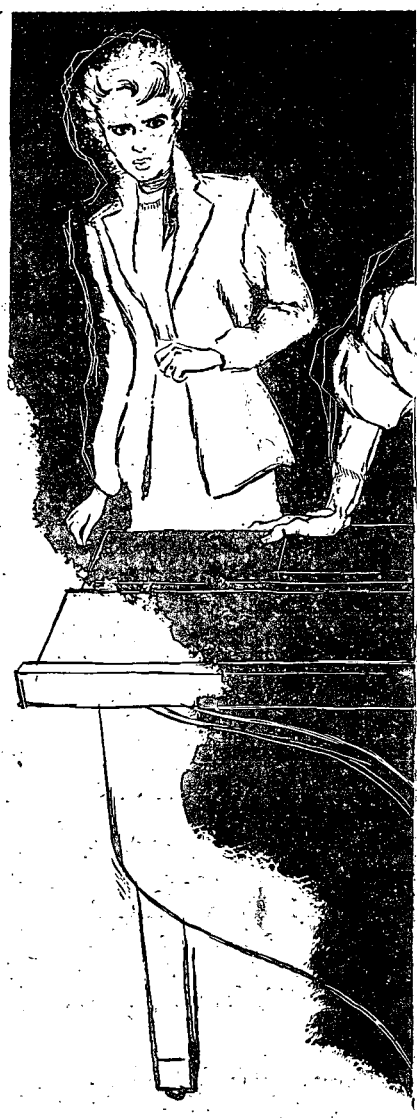
"Evening," said Pallas. Without preliminaries she demanded, "How are yours?"

Verna sighed. "Not so well. Two are willing, one isn't. The little fool."

"They're all fools," said Pallas. "Two billion stupid fools. Never heard of such a place."

"They want to do everything by twos," said Verna. "They're all afraid they'll lose something if they don't pair off, pair off. They've been schooled and pushed and ordered and taught that that's the way it must be, so—" she sighed again— "that's the way it is."

"We haven't much more time. I wish we hadn't lost—" There followed a dim attempt to project "Mak," a mental designation for



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which there was no audible equivalent.

"Oh, dear, *stop* saying that! You're always saying that. Our first third is gone, all eaten up, and that's the way it is."

"WE'RE two," said Pallas caustically, "and we don't want to be. Are you all right?"

"Thoroughly encysted, thank you. Pa'ak can't get to me. I'm so well encased I can barely get through to control this—" she lifted her arms and dropped them heavily on the table—"this bag of bones. And I can't telepath. I wish I could communicate with you and the others directly, instead of through this primitive creature and its endless idioms. I've even got to use that clumsy terrestrial name of yours—there's no vocalization for our real ones." Again there was an effort to identify the speaker as "Myk" and the other as "Mok," which failed.

"*I* wish I could get through to the others. Goodness! A weak signal once in a while—a mere 'come close' or 'go away'—and in between, nothing, for weeks on end."

"Oh, but they've got to stay closed up so tight! You know how the Pa'ak infection works—increasing the neurotic potential so that the virus can feed on the released nervous energy. There are two groups of three people who must come together by their own free emotional merging, or Ril's three parts and Kad's three parts can never become one again. To allow them that emotional freedom is to allow the Pa'ak virus which infests them to remain active, since they tend to be attracted to one another for neurotic reasons. At least we don't have *that* much trouble. There was so little neurosis or anything else left in these minds when we took them over that they were poor feeding grounds for Pa'ak. And that's the—"

"Verna, can you spare me that everlasting—"

"—the way it is," finished Verna inexorably. "I'm sorry, Pallas, truly. There's a horrid little push-button in this mind that plays that phrase off every once in a while no matter what I do. I'm rebuilding the mind as fast as I can; I'll get to it soon. I hope."

"Verna . . ." said Pallas with an air of revelation. "We can speed this thing up. I'm sure we can. Look. These fools won't group in threes. And Ril and Kad can't complete themselves unless their three hosts are emotionally ready for it. Now then." She leaned forward over her teacup. "There's no important difference between *two* groups of *three* and *three* groups of *two*."

"You really think . . . why, Pallas, that's a *marvelous* idea. You're so clever, dear! Now, the first thing we'll have to—"

They both froze in an attitude of listening.

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"My word," said Verna. "That's a bad one."

"I'll go," said Pallas. "That's one of the creatures I'm guarding. Ril is in it."

"Shall I come too?"

"You stay here. I'll take a taxi and keep in touch with you. When I'm far enough away I'll triangulate. Keep watch for that signal again. Goodness! What an urgent one!"

She trotted out. Verna looked across at Pallas' untouched teacup. "She left me with the check." A sigh. "Well, that's the way it is."

* * *

The news is the artificial satellite program and flying discs . . . three-stage rockets and guilt by association.

* * *

DR. JONATHAN PRINCE was saying, "The world's never been in such a state. Industrialization is something you can graph, and you find a geometric increase. You can graph the incidence of psychoneuroses the same way and find almost the same curve, but it's a much larger one. I tell you, Edie, it's as if something were cultivating our little traumas and anxieties like plowed fields to increase their yield, and then feeding off them."

"But so much is being done, Jon!" his ex-wife protested.

Jon waved his empty glass. "There are 39,000 psychotherapists to how many millions of people who need their help? There's a crying need for some kind of simple, standardized therapy, and people refuse to behave either simply or according to standards. Somewhere, somehow, there's a new direction in therapy. So-called orthodox procedures as they now exist don't show enough promise. They take too long. If by some miracle of state support and streamlined education you could create therapists for everyone who needed them, you'd have what amounted to a nation or a world of full-time therapists. Someone's got to bake bread and drive buses, you know."

"What about these new therapies I've been reading about?" Edie wanted to know.

"Oh, they're a healthy sign to a certain extent; they indicate we know how sick we are. The most encouraging thing about them is their diversity. There are tools and schools and phoneys and fads. There's psychoanalysis, where the patient talks about his troubles to the therapist, and narcosynthesis, where the patient's troubles talk to the therapist, and hypnotherapy, where the therapist talks to the patient's troubles.

"There's insulin to jolt a man out of his traumas and electric shock to subconsciously frighten him out of them, and CO_2 to choke the traumas to death. And there's the pre-frontal lobotomy, the trans-orbital leukotomy, and the topec-

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tomy to cut the cables between a patient's expression of his aberrations and its power supply, with the bland idea that the generator will go away if you can't see it any more. And there's Reichianism which, roughly speaking, identifies Aunt Susan, who slapped you, with an aching kneecap which, when cured, cures you of Aunt Susan too.

"And there's—but why go on? The point is that the mushrooming schools of therapy show that we know we're sick; that we're anxious—but not yet anxious enough, *en masse*—to do something about it, and that we're willing to attack the problem on all salients and sectors."

"What kind of work have you been doing recently?" Edie asked.

"Electro-encephalographics, mostly. The size and shape of brain-wave graphs will show a great deal once we get enough of them. And—did you know there's a measurable change in volume of the fingertips that follows brain-wave incidence very closely in disturbed cases? Fascinating stuff. But sometimes I feel it's the merest dull nudging at the real problems involved. Sometimes I feel like a hard-working contour cartographer trying to record the height and grade of ocean waves. Every time you duplicate an observation to check it, there's a valley where there was a mountain a second ago.

"And sometimes I feel that if we could just turn and look in the right direction, we'd see what's doing it to us, plain as day. Here we sit with our psychological bottle of arnica and our therapeutic cold compresses, trying to cure up an attack of lumps on the headbone. And if we could only turn and look in the right place, there would be an invisible maniac with a stick, beating us over the head, whom we'd never detected before."

"You sound depressed."

"Oh, I'm not, really," he said. He stood up and stretched. "But I almost wish I'd get away from that recurrent thought of looking in a new direction; of correlating neurosis with a virus disorder. Find the virus and cure the disease. It's panacea; wishful thinking. I'm probably getting lazy."

"Not you, Jon." His ex-wife smiled at him. "Perhaps you have the answer, subconsciously, but what you've learned won't let it come out."

"VERY astute. What made you say that?"

"It's a thing you used to say all the time."

He laughed and helped her up. "Edie, do you have to get up early tomorrow?"

"I'm unemployed. Didn't I tell you?"

"I didn't ask," he said ruefully. "My God, I talk a lot. Would you like to see my new lab?"

"I'd love to! Oh, I'd love it. Will it be—all right?"

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"All right? Of course it—oh. I see what you mean. Priscilla. Where is she, anyway?"

"She went out. I thought you noticed. With that man who plays the guitar. Irving." She nodded toward the discarded instrument.

"I hadn't noticed," he said. Over his features slipped the poker expression of the consulting psychologist. "Who did you come with?"

"The same one. Irving. Jon, I hope Priscilla can take care of herself."

"Let's go," he said.

* * *

Faintly, and with exasperation, Ril's thought came stumblingly through to Ryl and Rul:

"How can a thinking being be so stupid? Have you ever heard a more accurate description of the Pa'ak virus than that? 'Cultivating our little traumas and anxieties like plowed fields to increase their yield, and then feeding off them.' And 'a new direction.' Why haven't these people at least extrapolated the idea of energy life? They know that matter and energy are the same. An energy virus is such a logical thing for them to think of!"

And Rul's response: "They can no more isolate their experiments from their neuroses than they can isolate their measuring instruments from gravity. Have patience. When we are able to unite again, we will have the strength to inform them."

Ril sent: "Patience? How much more time do you think we have before they start to spread the virus through this whole sector of the cosmos? They are improving rockets, aren't they? We should have sent for reinforcements. But then—how could we know we'd be trapped like this in separate entities which refuse to merge?"

"We couldn't," Ril answered. "We still have so much to learn about these creatures. Sending for reinforcements would solve nothing."

"And we have so little time," Rul mourned. "Once they leave Earth, the Pa'ak pestilence will no longer be isolated."

Ril responded: "Unless they are cured of the disease before they leave."

"Or prevented from leaving," Ryl pointed out. "An atomic war would lower the level of culture. If there is no choice, we could force them to fight—we have the power—and thus reduce their technology to the point where space flight would be impossible."

It was a frightening idea. They broke contact in trembling silence.

* * *

THEY had had a drink, and then coffee, and now Irving was leading her homeward. She hadn't wanted to go through the park, but it was late and he assured her that it was much shorter this way. "There are plenty of places through here where you can cut corners." It

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was easier not to argue. Irving commanded a flood of language at low pitch and high intensity that she could do without just now. She was tired and bored and extremely angry.

It was bad enough that Jon had deserted her for that bit of flotsam from his past. It was worse that she should have walked right past him with her hat on without his even looking up. What was worst of all was that she had let herself be so angry. She had no claims on Jonathan Prince. They were more than friends, certainly, but not any more than that.

"Who's the girl you came to the party with, Irving?" she asked.

"Oh, her. Someone trying to get a job at the plant. She's a real bright girl. Electronics engineer—can you imagine?"

"And—"

HE GLANCED down at her. "And what? I found out she was a cold fish, that's all."

Oh, she thought. So you ditched her because you thought she was a cold fish, and scooped me up. And what does that make me? Aloud she said, "These paths wind around the park so. Are you sure it's going to take us out on the downtown side?"

"I know everything about these woods." He peered. "This way."

They turned off the blacktop walk and took a graveled path away to the right. The path was brilliantly lit by a street-lamp at the crossing of the walks, and the light followed the path in a straight band through the undergrowth. It seemed so safe . . . and then Irving turned off to still another path. She turned with him, unthinking, and blinked her eyes against a sudden, oppressive darkness.

It was a small cul de sac, completely surrounded by heavy undergrowth. As her eyes became accustomed to the dim light that filtered through the trees, she saw benches and two picnic tables. A wonderful, secluded, restful little spot, she thought—for a picnic.

"How do you like this?" whispered Irving hoarsely. He sounded as if he had been running.

"I don't," she said immediately. "It's late, Irving. This isn't getting either of us anywhere."

"Oh, I don't know," he said. He put his arms around her. She leaned away from him with her head averted, swung her handbag back and up at his face. He caught her wrist deftly and turned it behind her.

"Don't," she gasped. "Don't . . ."

"You've made your little protest like a real lady, honey, so it's on the record. Now save us some time and trouble. Let's get to it."

She kicked him. He gasped but stood solidly. There was a sharp click behind her. "Hear that?" he said. "That's my switch-blade. Push a button and zip!—seven inches of nice sharp steel. Now

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don't you move or make a sound, sweetheart, and this'll be fun for both of us."

Locking her against him with his left arm, he reached slowly up under the hem of her short jacket. She felt the knife against her back. It slipped coldly between her skin and the back of her low-cut dress. "Don't you move," he said again. The knife turned, sawed a little, and the back strap of her brassiere parted. The knife was removed; she heard it click again. He dropped it into his jacket pocket.

"Now," he breathed, "doesn't that feel better, lamb-pie?"

SHE filled her lungs to scream, and instantly his hard hand was clamped over her mouth. It was a big hand, and the palm was artfully placed so that she couldn't get her mouth open wide enough to use her teeth on it.

"Let's not wrestle," he said, his voice really gentle, pleading. "It just doesn't make sense. I'd as soon kill you as not—you know that."

She stood trembling violently, her eyes rolled up almost out of sight. Her mouth sagged open when he kissed it. Then he screamed.

His arms whipped away from her and she fell. She lay looking dully up at him. He stood straight in the dim light, stretched, his face up and twisted with pain. He had both hands, apparently, on one of his back pockets. He whirled around and her eyes followed him.

There was someone else standing there . . . someone in black. Someone who looked like a high-school teacher Priscilla had once had. Gray hair, thin, wattled face.

Moving without haste but with great purpose, the spinsterish apparition stooped, raised her skirts daintily and kicked Irving accurately in the groin. He emitted a croaking sound and dropped to a crouch, and began a small series of agonized grunts. The old lady stepped forward as if she were dancing a minuet, put out one sensible shoe and shoved. Irving went down on his knees and elbows, his head hanging.

"Get out," said the old lady crisply. "*Now.*" She clapped her hands once. The sound stiffened Irving. With a long, breathy groan he staggered to his feet, turned stupidly to get his bearings and hobbled rapidly away.

"Come on, dear." The woman got her hands under Priscilla's armpits and helped her up. She half-carried the girl over to one of the picnic tables and seated her on the bench. With an arm around Priscilla's shoulders, she held her upright while she put a large black handbag on the table. Out of it she rummaged a voluminous handkerchief which she thrust into Priscilla's hands. "Now, you sit there and cry a while."

Priscilla said, still trembling, "I can't," and burst into tears.

When it was over she blew her

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nose weakly. "I don't . . . know what to say to you. I—he would have killed me."

"No, he wouldn't. Not while I'm alive and carry a hatpin."

"Who are you?"

"A friend. If you'll believe that, child, that's good enough for me and it'll have to be good enough for you."

"I believe that," said Priscilla. She drew a long, shuddering breath. "How can I ever thank you?"

"By paying attention to what I tell you. But you must tell me some things first. How did you ever get yourself mixed up with such an animal? You surely have better sense than that."

"PLEASE don't scold . . . I was silly, that's all."

"You were in a tizzy, you mean. You were, weren't you?"

"Well," sniffed Priscilla, "yes. You see, I work with this doctor, and he and I—it isn't anything formal, you understand, but we work so well together and laugh at the same things, and it's . . . nice. And then he—"

"Go on."

"He was married once. Years ago. And he saw her tonight. And he didn't look at me any more. I guess I'm foolish, but I got all upset."

"Why?"

"I told you. He just wanted to talk to her. He forgot I was alive."

"That isn't why. You were upset because you were afraid he'd get together with her again."

"I—I suppose so."

"Do you want to marry him?"

"Why, I—I don't . . . . No, I wouldn't. It isn't that."

The old lady nodded. "You think if he married her again—or anyone else—that it would make a big difference in the work you do together, in the way he treats you?"

"I . . . don't suppose there would be any big difference, no," Priscilla said thoughtfully. "I'd never thought it through."

"And," continued the old lady relentlessly, "have you thought through any other possible course of action he could have taken tonight? He was married to her for some time. He apparently hasn't seen her for years. It must have been a small shock to him to find her there. Now, what else might he have done? 'Goodness gracious, there's my old used-up wife. Priscilla, let's dance.' Is that what you expected?"

At last she giggled. "You're wonderful. And you're right, you are so absolutely right. I have been sil—Oh!"

"What is it?"

"You called me Priscilla. How did you know my name? Who are you?"

"A friend. Come along, girl; you can't sit here all night." She drew the startled girl to her feet. "Here, let me look at you. Your lipstick's smeared. Over here.

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That's better. Can you button that jacket? I think perhaps you should. Not that it should matter if your bust *does* show, the way you brazen things dress nowadays. There now, come along."

She hurried Priscilla through the park, and when they reached the street, turned north. Priscilla tugged at the black sleeve. "Please —wait. I live *that* way." She pointed.

"I know, I know. But you're not going home just yet. Come along, child!"

"Where are you—we—going?"

"You'll see. Now listen to me. Do you trust me?"

"Oh, my goodness, yes!"

"Very well. When we get where we're going, you'll go inside alone. Don't worry now, it's perfectly safe. Once you're inside you'll do something very stupid indeed."

"I will?"

"You will. You'll turn around and try to leave. Now, then, I want you to understand that you must *not* leave. I shall be standing outside to see that you don't."

"But I—But why? What am I supposed . . . where . . ."

"Hush, child! You do as you're told and you'll be all right."

Priscilla walked along in silence for a time. Then she said, "All right." The old lady turned to look into the softest-smiling, most trusting face she had ever seen. She put her arm around Priscilla's shoulders and squeezed.

"You'll do," she said.

HENRY FAULKNER sat in a booth, far from the belly-thumping juke box and the knot of people chattering away at the head-end of the bar. Henry's elbows were on the table and his thumbs, fitted carefully into the bony arches over his eyelids, supported the weight of his head. The cafe went round and round like a Czerny etude, but with a horizontal axis. The walls moved upward in front of him and down behind him, and he felt very ill. Once he had forced down three beers, and that was his established capacity; it had bloated him horribly and he'd had a backache in the morning. Tonight he'd had four double ryes.

"There he shtood," he said to one of the blonde girls who sat opposite, "nex' to the conductor, watching the orch'stra, an' sometimes he'd beat time wiz arms. When the last movement ended, th' audience rozhe up as one man an' roared. An' there he shtood, nex' to the conductor—"

"You said that before," said the girls. They spoke in unison, and the pair of them had only one voice, like the doubled leading tone in a major chord.

"There he shtood," Henry went on, "shtill beating time after the music stopped. An' the conductor, wi' *eyes* in his tears—wi' *tears* in his eyes—turned him around so he could *shee* the applause."

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"What was the matter with him?" asked the girls.

"He was deaf."

"Who was?"

"Beethoven." Henry wept.

"My God. Is that what you're tying one on about?"

"You said to tell you the sad story," said Henry. "You didn't say tell you *my* sad story."

"Okay, okay. You got money, ain't you?"

Henry lifted his head and reared back to get perspective. It was then that the girl merged and became one; he realized that there had been one all along, in spite of what he had seen. That explained why they both had the same voice. He was extravagantly pleased. "Sure I got money."

"Well, come on up to my place. I'm tired uh sittin' around here."

"Very gracious," he intoned. "I shall now tell you the sad story of my laysted wife."

"What type wife?"

"I beg your pardon? I've never been married."

The girl looked perplexed. "Start over again."

"Da capo," he said with his finger beside his nose. "Very well. I repeat. I shall now tell you the story of my wasted life."

"Oh," said the girl.

"I have had the ultimate in rejections," said Henry solemnly. "I fell in love, deeply, deeply, deeply, dee—"

"Who with?" said the girl tiredly. "Get to the point and let's get out of here."

"With a string bass. A bull, as it were, fiddle." He nodded solemnly.

"Ah, fer Pete's sake," she said scornfully. She stood up. "Look, mister, I can't waste the whole night. Are you comin' or ain't you?"

HENRY scowled up at her. He hadn't asked for her company. She'd just appeared there in the booth. She had niggled and nagged until he was about to tell her all the things he had come here to forget. And now she wanted to walk out. Suddenly he was furious. He, who had never raised his hand or his voice in his whole life, was suddenly so angry that he was, for a moment, blind. He growled like the open D on a bass clarinet and leaped at her. His clawed hand swept past her fluffy collar and got caught, tore the collar a little, high on the shoulder.

She squealed in routine fear. The bartender hopped up sitting on the bar and swung his thick legs over.

"What the hell's going on back there?" he demanded, pushing himself off onto the floor.

The blonde said, shrilly and indignantly, exactly what she thought Henry was trying to do.

"Right there in the booth?" said a bourbon up the row.

"That I got to see," replied a beer.

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They started back, followed by the rest of the customers.

The bartender reached into the booth and lifted Henry bodily out of it. Henry, sick and in a state of extreme panic, wriggled free and ran—two steps. The side of his head met the bridge of the bourbon's nose. Henry was aware of a dull crunch. There were exploding lights and he went down, rolled, got to his feet again.

The girl was screaming in a scratchy monotone somewhere around high E flat. The bourbon was sitting on the floor with blood spouting from his nose.

"*Get 'im!*" somebody barked.

Powerful hands caught Henry's thin biceps. A heavy man stood in front of him, gigantic yellow mallets of fists raised.

"Hold him tight," said the heavy man. "I'm gonna let him have it."

And then a sort of puffball with bright blue eyes was between Henry and the heavy man. In a soft, severe voice it said, "Leave him alone, you—you bullies! You let that man go, this very minute!"

Henry shook his head. He regretted the movement, but among the other things it made him experience was clearing sight. He looked at the puffball, which became a sweet-faced lady in her fifties. She had gentleness about her mouth and sheer determination in her crackling blue eyes.

"You better stay out of this, Granny," said the bartender not unkindly. "This character's got it comin' to him."

"You'll let him go this instant!" said the lady, and stamped a small foot. "And that's the way it is."

"Al," said the heavy man to the bartender, "just lead this lady off to one side while I paste this bastard."

"Don't you put a hand on me."

"Watch your language, Sylvan," said the bartender to the heavy man. He put a hand on the lady's shoulder. "Come over her a sec—*uh!*"

THE final syllable was his staccato response to the old lady's elbow in the pit of his stomach. That, however, was not the end of her—literally—chain reaction. She swung her crocus reticule around in a full-armed arc and brought it down on the heavy man's head. He sank to the floor without a whimper. In the same movement she put her other hand swiftly but firmly against Henry's jaw and pushed it violently. His head tipped back and smashed into the face of the man who stood behind him holding his arms. The man staggered backward, tripped, and fell, bouncing his skull off an unpadded bar stool.

"Come along, Henry," said the old lady cheerfully. She took him by the wrist as if he were a small boy whose face needed washing, and marched him out of the cafe.

On the street he gasped, "They'll chase us . . ."

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"Naturally," said the lady. She put two fingers into her mouth and blew a piercing blast. A block and a half away, a parked taxicab slid away from the curb and came toward them. There was shouting from the cafe. The taxicab pulled up beside them. The lady whipped the door open and pushed Henry in. As four angry men shouldered out on the sidewalk, she reached deep into her reticule and snatched a dark object from it. She stood poised for a moment, and in the neon-shot half-light Henry saw what was in her hand—an old-fashioned, top-of-stove flat iron. He understood then why the heavy man had drowsed off so readily.

The lady hefted the iron and let it fly. It grazed the temple of one of the men and flew straight through a plate glass window. The man who was hit went to his knees, his hands holding his head. The other three fell all over each other trying to get back out of range. The lady skipped into the cab and said calmly, "Young man, take us away from here."

"Yes, *ma'am!*" said the driver in an awed tone, and let in his clutch.

They jounced along in silence for a moment, and then she leaned forward. "Driver, pull up by one of these warehouses. Henry's going to be sick."

"I'm all right," said Henry weakly. The cab stopped. The lady opened the door. "Come along!"

"No, really, I—"

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The lady snapped her fingers.

"Oh, all right," said Henry sheepishly. In the black shadows by the warehouse he protested faintly, "But I don't *want* to be sick!"

"I know what's best," she said solicitously. She took his hand, spread it, and presented him with his long middle finger, point first, as if it were a clinical thermometer. "Down your throat," she ordered.

"No!" he said loudly.

"Are you going to do as you're told?"

He looked at her. "Yes."

"I'll hold your head," she said. "Go on."

She held his head.

Afterward, in the cab, he asked her timidly if she would take him home now.

"No," she said. "You play the piano, don't you, Henry?"

He nodded.

"Well, you're going to play for me." She reached forcefully into her reticule again, and his protest died on his trembling lips. "Here," she said, and handed him an old-fashioned mint.

PRISCILLA mounted the stairs. She had a "walking-under-water" feeling, as if she were immersed in her own reluctance. She had trod these stairs many times at night—usually downward after a perplexing, intriguing series of experiments. She did not know why she should be returning to the laboratory now, except that she had

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been ordered to do so. She freely admitted that if it were not for the thin, straight figure in black who waited downstairs, she would certainly be in bed by now. But there was an air of command, of complete certainty about the old lady who had saved her that was utterly compelling.

She walked quietly down the carpeted hall. The outer door of the lab office was ajar. There was no light in the office, but a dim radiance filtered in from the lab itself, through the frosted panel of the inner door. She crossed to it and went in.

Someone gasped.

Someone said, "Priscilla!"

Priscilla said, "Excuse *me!*" and spun around. She shot through the office and out into the hall, her cheeks burning, her eyes stinging. "He— he—" she sobbed, but could not complete the thought, would not review the picture she had seen.

At the lower landing she raced to the street door, valiantly holding back the tears and the sobs that would accompany them. Her hand went out to the big brass doorknob, touched it—

As the cool metal greeted her hand she stopped.

Outside that door, standing on the walk by the iron railings, radiating strength and rectitude, would be the old lady. She would watch Priscilla come out of the building. She would probably nod her head in knowledgable disappointment. She would doubtless say, "I told you you would want to leave, and that it would be foolish."

"But they were—" said Priscilla in audible protest.

Then came the thought of trustfulness: "Listen to me. Do you trust me?"

PRISCILLA took her hand away from the knob. She thought she heard the murmur of low voices upstairs.

She remembered the talk about Jon and his meeting with Edie at the party. She remembered herself saying, "I—just didn't think it through."

She turned and faced the stairs. "I can't, I can't possibly go back. Not now. Even if . . . even if it didn't make any difference to me, they'd . . . they'd hate me. It would be a terrible thing to do, to go back."

She turned until the big brass knob nudged her hip. Its touch projected a vivid picture into her mind—the old lady, straight and waiting in the lamplight.

She sighed and started slowly up the stairs again.

When she got to the office this time the light was on. She pushed the door open. Jon was leaning against the desk, watching it open. Edie, his ex-wife, stood by the laboratory door, her wide-spaced eyes soft and bright. For a moment no one moved. Then Edie went to Jon and stood beside him, and together

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they watched Priscilla with questions on their faces, and something like gentle sympathy. Or was it empathy?

Priscilla came in slowly. She went up to Edie and stopped. She said, "You're just what he needed."

The wide dark eyes filled with tears. Edie put her arms out and Priscilla was in them without quite knowing which of them had moved. When she could, Edie said, "You are so lovely, Priscilla. You're so very lovely." And Priscilla knew she was not talking about her red hair or her face.

Jon put a hand on each of their shoulders. "I don't understand what's happening here," he said, "but I have the feeling that it's good. Priscilla, why did you come here?"

She looked at him and said nothing.

"What made you come back?"

She shook her head.

"You know," he smiled, "but you're just not talking. You've never done a wiser thing than to come back. If you hadn't, Edie and I would have been driven apart just as surely as if you'd used a wedge. Am I right, Edie?"

Edie nodded. "You've made us very happy."

Priscilla felt embarrassed. "You are giving me an awful lot of credit," she said in a choked voice. "I didn't really do anything. I wish I had the—the bigness or wisdom you think I have." She raised her eyes to them. "I'll try to live up to it, though. I will . . ."

The phone rang.

"Now who could that—" Jon reached for it.

Priscilla took it out of his hand. "I'll take it."

Edie and Jon looked at each other. Priscilla said into the phone, "Yes . . . yes, it's me. How in the world did you . . . Tonight? But it's so late! Will you be there? Then so will I. Oh, you're wonderful . . . yes, right away."

She hung up.

Jon said, "Who was it?"

Priscilla laughed. "A friend."

Jon touched her jaw. "All right, Miss Mysterious. What's it all about?"

"Will you do something if I ask you? You, too, Edie?"

"Oh, yes."

Priscilla laughed again. "We do have something to celebrate, don't we?" When they nodded, she laughed again. "Well, come on!"

IT WAS easier to carry the chopsticks piano-player with Derek to help, Jane concluded. She watched the rapt faces in the club. The house counted good, and it was going great, but she couldn't help thinking what it would be like if Derek hadn't been so pigheaded about little Henry. She finished her chorus and the piano took it up metronomically, nudged on the upbeats by the authoritative beat of

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Derek's bass. She looked at him. He was playing steadily, almost absently. His face was sullen. When he got absentminded he wasn't colossal any more; only terrific.

The piano moved through an obvious C-sharp seventh chord to change key to F-sharp, her key for the windup. She drifted into the bridge section with a long glissando, and disgust moved into her face and Derek's in perfect sychronization as they realized that the pianist was blindly going into another 32 bars from the beginning.

Derek doubled his beat and slapped the strings hard, and the sudden flurry of sound snapped the pianist out of it. Blushing, he recovered the fluff. Jane rolled her eyes up in despair and finished the number. To scattered applause she turned to the piano and said, "Tinkle some. Derek and I are going to take ten. And while you're tinkling," she added viciously, "*practice,* huh?"

She smiled at the audience, crossed the stand and touched Derek's elbow. "I'm going behind that potted palm and flip my lid. Come catch it."

He put his bass out of harm's way and followed her into the office. She let him pass her and slump down on the desk. She banged the door.

"You—"

He looked at her sullenly. "I know what you're going to say. I threw out the best ten fingers in the business. I told you I don't want to talk about it. You don't believe that, do you?"

"I believe it," she said. Her eyes glittered. "Derek Jax, I love you."

"Cut it out."

"I'm not kidding. I'm not changing the subject, either. I love you this much. I'm going to call your hand, kid. I love you so much that I'm going to make you talk about what's with this business of Henry, or I'm going to see you walk out of here with, and into, your doghouse."

"That don't make a hell of a lot of sense, Janie," he said uncomfortably.

"No, huh? Listen, the guy I love talks to me. I understand him enough so he can talk to me. If he won't talk to me, it's because he thinks I won't understand. I think you see what I mean. I love the guy I think you are. If you won't talk about it, you're just not that guy. Maybe that doesn't mean anything to you."

"Could be," he growled. He rose and stretched. "Well, guess I'll be going. Nice working with you, Janie."

"So long," she said. She went and opened the door.

"By God," he said, "you really mean it."

She nodded.

HE LICKED his lips, then bit them. He sat down. "Shut the door, Janie."

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She shut the door and put her head against it. He flashed her a look. "What's the matter?"

She said hoarsely, "I got something in my eye. Wait." Presently she swung around and faced him. Her smile was brilliant, her face composed. The vein in the side of her neck was thick and throbbing.

"Jane . . ." he said with difficulty, "that Henry—did he ever make a pass at you?"

"Why, you egghead. No! To him I'm something that makes music, like a saxophone. It's you he's interested in. Hell, did you see his face when you came in with your bass this afternoon? He'd rather play to that bass than go over the falls in a barrel with me. If that's all that was on your mind, forget it."

"You make it tough for me," he said heavily. "I'll play it through for you a note at a time. Got a stick?"

She rummaged in the desk drawer and found him a cigarette. He lit it and dragged until he coughed. She had never seen him like this. She said nothing.

He seemed to appreciate that. He glanced at her and half his mouth flashed part of a smile. Then he said, "Did I ever tell you about Danny?"

"No."

"Kids together. Kids get close. He lived down the pike. I got caught in a root one time, swimming in a rock quarry. Danny seemed to know the instant I got tangled. He couldn't swim worth a damn, but in he came. Got me out, too."

He dragged on his cigarette, still hungry, hot and harsh. The words came out, smoking. "There was a lot of stuff . . . we played ball, we run away from home, we broke into an ol' house and pried loose a toilet and threw it out a fourth-floor window onto a concrete walk. We done a lot.

"We jived a lot. He had natural rhythm. We used to bang away on his ol' lady's piano. I played trumpet for a while, but what I wanted to do was play string bass. I wanted that real bad.

"We grew up and he moved away. Some lousy job trying to learn cabinet-making. Saw him a couple times. Half-starved, but real happy. I was playing bass by then, some. Had to borrow a fiddle. Wanted my own instrument *so* bad, never had the money. So one day he called me up long distance. Come over. I didn't have no train-fare, so I hitchhiked. Met him at a barrelhouse joint in town. He was real excited, dragged me out to his place. A shack—practically a shanty. When we got in sight of it he started to run. It was on fire."

DEREK closed his eyes and went on talking. "We got to it and it was pretty far gone. I got there first. One wall was gone. Inside everything was burning.

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Danny, he—he screamed like a stung kid. He tried to jump inside. I hung on to him. Was much bigger'n him. Then I saw it—a string bass. A full-size string bass, burning up. I sat on Danny and watched it burn. I knew why he'd moved out of town. I knew why he took up cabinet-making. I knew why he was so hungry an'—an' so happy. Made the box with his own two hands. We watched it burn and he tried to fight me because I would not let him save it. He cried. Well —*we* cried. Just two kids."

Jane said a single, unprintable word with a bookful of feeling behind it.

"We got over it. We roomed together after that. We done everything together. Crowd we ran with used to kid us about it, and that just made it better. I guess we were about nineteen then."

He squeezed out a long breath and looked up at her with stretched, blind eyes. "We had something, see? Something clean and big that never happened before, and wasn't nothing wrong with it.

"Then I come home one night and he's at the back window staring into the yard. Said he was moving out. Said we weren't doing each other any good. He was in bad shape. Somebody'd been talking to him, some lousy crumb with a sewer mouth and sewer ideas. I didn't know what it was all about. We were still just kids, see?

"Anyway, I couldn't talk him out out of it. He left. He was half-crazy, all eaten up. Like the time we watched the bull-fiddle burn up. He wouldn't say what was the trouble. So after he went I milled around the joint trying to make sense out of it and I couldn't. Then I—"

Derek's voice seemed to desert him. He coughed hard and got it back. "—Then I went and looked out the window. Somebody'd wrote our names on the fence. Drew a heart around 'em.

"I never gave a damn what anyone thought, see? But Danny, he did. I guess you can't know how someone else feels, but you can get a pretty fair idea. First I was just mad, and then I pretended I was Danny looking at a thing like that, and I got an idea how bad it was. I ran out lookin' for him.

"Saw him after a time. Up by the highway, staggering a bit like he was half-soused. He wasn't, though. I ran after him. He was waiting for the light to change. There was a lot of traffic. Tried to get to him. Couldn't begin to. He sort of pitched off the curb right under oh my God I can still see it the big dual wheel it run right over his head . . ." he finished in a rapid monotone.

JANE put her hand on his shoulder. Derek said, "I didn't know then and I don't know now and I never will know if he was so tore up and sick he just fell, or if he

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done it on purpose. All I know is I've lived ever since with the idea I killed him just by being around him so much. Don't try to talk me out of it. I know it don't make sense. I know all the right answers. But knowing don't help.

"That's the whole story."

Jane waited a long time and then said gently, "No, Derek."

He started as if he had suddenly found himself in an utterly strange place. Gradually his sense of presence returned to him and he wiped his face.

"Yeah," he said. "Your boy Henry. Danny—he played piano, Janie. I started with him. Danny played piano like nothing that ever lived except this Henry. Everything I ever drug out of a string bass was put in there first by the way he played piano. He used to sit and play like that and every once in a while grin at me. Shy.

"So I walk in here on a guy playing that kind of piano and he grins shy like that when he plays, and besides, here's that *real close* stuff around him like a fog. That Henry's a genius, Janie. And he's a—he's the type of guy they ought to use for a mold to make *people* out of. And he just wants to be near my fiddle. And me. And you want me to keep him around here until he knocks hisself off.

"Janie," he said, with agony in his voice, *"I'm not goin' through that again!"*

Jane squeezed his shoulder. She looked back over the afternoon and evening and words flitted through her mind: "You won't have to lose any sleep over him" . . . "Looks like you've made a conquest" . . . "Did he ever make a pass at you?" Aloud she told him, "I've sure said all the right things . . . take a swing at me, pudd'nhead."

Derek pulled her hand close against his cheek and pressed it there so hard it hurt her. She let him do it as long as he wanted. "I love you, Janie," he whispered. "I shoulda told you all that about Danny a long time ago."

"How could you tell till you tried?" she asked huskily. "Let's go on out there before ol' Kitten on the Keys drives all the customers away."

"I CAN'T go in there," said Henry Faulkner in genuine panic.

"You can and you will," said the old lady firmly.

"Listen, there's a man in there who'll throw me out on sight."

"Have I been wrong yet? This is your night to do as you're told, young man, and that's the way it is."

In spite of himself he grinned. They went in through the herculite doors. Janie was just finishing a number. The piano fluffed the last chorus badly. Henry and the old lady stood in the back of the club until Derek and Jane walked off the floor.

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"Now," she said briskly, "go on up there and play for me. Play anything you want to."

"But they have a piano player!"

"He's in a pet. Just go up there."

"Wh-what'll I say to him?"

"Don't say anything, silly! Just stand there. He'll go away."

He hesitated, and the lady gave him a small shove. He shambled around the dance floor and diffidently approached the piano.

The pianist was playing a ding-dong version of *Stardust*. He saw Henry coming. "You again."

Henry said nothing.

"I suppose you want to take my job again."

Henry still said nothing. The man went on playing. Presently, "You can have it. How anyone can work with a couple sourpusses like that . . ." He got off the stool in mid-chorus, leaving *Stardust's* garden gate musically ajar. Henry's right hand shot out and, catching the chord as if it had been syncopated instead of shut off, began molding it like a handful of soft clay. He sat down still playing.

EDIE said, "I can't help feeling a little peculiar. This is wonderful, so wonderful—but there are still two of us and one of you."

"Three of us," corrected Priscilla.

"In some ways that's so," said Jon. He swallowed the rest of his drink and beckoned the waiter. "Pris is the best statistician and psychological steno I've ever run across. And you're a genius with the machines. Why, between us we will do research that'll make history."

"Of course we will. But—isn't three a crowd?"

Priscilla said, without malice, "From anyone but you I'd consider that a hint. Don't worry about me. I have the most wonderful feeling that the miracles aren't finished."

"Pris, are you ever going to tell us about the miracles?"

"I don't know, Jon. Perhaps." Her eyes searched the club. Suddenly they fixed on a distant corner table. "There she is!"

"Who?" Jon twisted around. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"What is it?" asked Edie.

"Excuse me," said Jon, and rose. "Someone I've got to see." He stalked over to the corner table and glowered down at its occupants. "May I ask what you're doing here?"

"Why, Dr. Prince!" said Pallas. "Imagine meeting you here!"

"What are you two doing here at this time of night?"

"We can go where we like," said Verna, smoothing her snowy hair, "and that's the way it is."

"We're not due to report to you until the day after tomorrow," said Pallas self-righteously.

"There's no law against a lady having a spot at bedtime," amended Verna.

"You two never cease to amaze

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me," Jon said, chuckling in spite of himself. "Just be careful. I'd hate to see my prize exhibits get hurt."

They smiled up at him. "We'll be all right. We'll talk to you again later, won't we, Verna?"

"Oh, yes," said Verna. "Definitely. That's the way it is."

STILL chuckling, Jon went back to his table. "There sits the damnedest pair of human beings I've encountered yet," he said as he sat down. "Three years ago they were senile psychotics, the two of them. As far as I can determine they had no special therapy—they were in the County Home, and as mindless as a human being can get and stay alive. First thing you know they actually started feeding themselves—"

"Pallas and Verna!" said Priscilla. "You've mentioned—holy Pete! Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I'm on the Board out there. You know the case history. They have to report to me every sixty days."

"Well—I—will—be—damned," Priscilla intoned, awed.

"What is it, Pris? I didn't think you'd ever seen them. They've never been to the lab . . . Say, how did you recognize them just now?"

"Could . . . could you bring them over?"

"Oh, come now. This celebration is only for—"

"I've heard enough to be curious about them," said Edie. "Do invite them, Jon."

He shrugged and returned to the other table. In a moment he was back with the two spinsters. He drew out chairs for them in courtly fashion, and called a waiter. Pallas ordered a double rye, no chaser. Verna smiled like a kitten and ordered scotch on the rocks. "For our colds," she explained.

"How long have you had colds?" he demanded professionally.

"Oh, dear, we don't get colds," explained Verna sweetly. "That's because we drink our liquor straight."

Dr. Jonathan Prince felt it within him to lay down the law at this point. A patient was a patient. But there was something in the air that prevented it. He found himself laughing again. He thought he saw Pallas wink at Priscilla and shake her head slightly, but he wasn't sure. He introduced the girls. Without the slightest hesitation he introduced Edie as "my wife." She colored and looked pleased.

"Listen to that music," breathed Priscilla.

"Thought you'd notice it," said Pallas, and smiled at Verna.

They all listened. It was a modal, moody, rhythmic invention, built around a circle of chords in the bass which beat, and beat, and beat on a single sonorous tone. The treble progressed evenly, regularly, tripped up on itself and ran giggling around and through the steady

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structure of the bass modulations, then sobered and marched again, but always full of suppressed mirth.

Priscilla was craning her neck. "I can't see him!"

Verna said, "Why don't you go up there, dear? I'm sure he would not mind."

"Oh . . . really not?" She caught Pallas's eye. Pallas gave her one firm nod. Priscilla said, "Do you mind?" She slipped out of her chair and went up past the dance floor.

"Look at her," breathed Edie. "She's got that—that 'miracle' expression again . . . Oh, Jon, she's *so* lovely."

Jon said, looking at the spinsters, "What are you two hugging each other about?"

HENRY looked up from the keyboard and smiled shyly.

"Hello," Priscilla said.

"Hello." He looked at her face, her hair, her body, her eyes. His shyness was there, and no boldness was present; he looked at her the way she listened to his music. It was personal and not aggressive. He moved over on the bench. "Sit down."

Without hesitation she did. She looked at him, too—the hawk profile, the gentle gray-green eyes. "You play beautifully."

"Listen."

He played with his eyes on her face. His hands leaped joyfully like baby goats. Then they felt awe and hummed something. Henry stopped playing by ear. He began to sight-read.

Note followed note followed note for the line of her nose, and doubled and curved and turned back for her nostrils. The theme became higher and fuller and rounded and there was her forehead, and then there were colorful waves up and back for her hair. Here was a phrase for an earlobe, and one for the turn of the cheek, and now there were mysteries, two of them, long and subdued and agleam and end-tilted, and they were her eyes . . .

DEREK came out of the office and stopped so abruptly that Jane ran into him. Before she could utter the first startled syllable, her breath was taken away in a great gasp.

Derek turned and gestured at the music. "You—"

She looked up at him, the furious eyes, the terrified trembling at the corners of his mouth. "No, Derek, so help me God, I didn't ask him to come back. I wouldn't do that, Derek. I *wouldn't.*"

"You wouldn't," he agreed gently. "I know it, hon. I'm sorry. But out he goes." He strode out to the stand. Jane trotted behind him, and when they turned the corner she caught his arm so violently that her long fingernails sank into his flesh. *"Wait!"*

There was a girl on the bench with Henry, and as he played he

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stared at her face. His eyes moved over it, his own face moved closer. His hands made music like the almost visible current which flowed between them. Their lips touched.

There was a tinkling explosion of sound from the piano that built up in fullness and sonority until Jane and Derek all but blinked their eyes, as if it were a blaze of light. And then Henry's left hand picked up a theme, a thudding, joyous melody that brought the few late-owls in the club right to their feet. He no longer looked at the girl. His eyes were closed, and his hands spoke of himself and what he felt—a great honest hunger and new riches, a shy and willing experience with a hitherto undreamed-of spectrum of sensation.

Jane and Derek looked at each other with shining eyes. Jane said, deliberately, "Son, you got a rival," and Derek laughed in sheer relieved delight.

"I'm going to get my fiddle," he said.

When Derek started to play, four people left their table and came up to the piano as if cables drew them. Hand in hand, Jon and Edie stopped close by Priscilla and stood there, rapt as she. Pallas and Verna stood at the other end of the bench, their eyes glowing.

And out of the music, out of the bodies that fell into synchronization with the masterful pulse of the great viol, came a union, a blending of forces from each of six people. Each of the six had a part that was different from all of the others, but the shape of them all was a major chord, infinitely complete and completely satisfying.

"RIL!"

"Oh, make it formal, KadKedKud!"

"RilRylRul, then . . ."

"If only Mak were here."

"Myk is with us, and Muk. Poor partial things, and how hard they have worked, guarding and guiding with those pitifully inadequate human bodies as instruments. Come, Ril; we must decide. Now that we can operate fully, we can investigate these creatures."

Just as they had investigated, compared, computed and stored away observations on industrial techniques, strength of materials, stress and temperature and power and design, so now they took instant and total inventory of their hosts.

RilRylRul found classicism and inventiveness, tolerance and empathy in Henry. In Derek were loyalty and rugged strength and a powerful interpretive quality. In Jane was the full-blown beauty of sensualism and directive thought, and a unique stylization of the products of artistic creation.

KadKedKud separated and analyzed a splendid systematization in Priscilla, a superior grasp of applied theory in Edie, and in Jon that rarest of qualities, the asso-

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ciative mind—the mind that can bridge the specialties.

"A great race," said Ril, "but a sick one, badly infected with the Pa'ak pestilence."

"The wisest thing to do," reflected Kad, "would be to stimulate the virus to such an extent that humanity will impose its own quarantine—by reducing itself to savagery through atomic warfare. There is such a great chance of that, no matter what we do, that it would seem expedient to hasten the process. The object would be to force atomic warfare before space travel can begin. That at least would keep the virus out of the Galaxy, which is what we came here to effect."

"It's a temptation," conceded Ril. "And yet—what a tremendous species this human race could be! Let us stay, Kad. Let us see what we can do with them. Let us move on to other human groups, now that we know the techniques of entry and merging. With just the right pressure on exactly the right points, who knows? Perhaps we can cause them to discover how to cure themselves."

"It will be a close race," worried Kad. "We can do a great deal, but can we do it soon enough? We face three possibilities: Mankind may destroy itself through its own sick ingenuity; it may reach the stars to spread its infection; or it may find its true place as a healthy species in a healthy Cosmos. I would not predict which is more likely."

"Neither would I," Ril returned. "So if the forces are that closely balanced, I have hope for the one we join. Are you with me?"

"Agreed. Myk—Muk . . . will you join us?"

Faintly, faintly came the weak response of the two paltry parts of a once powerful triad: "Back in our sector we would be considered dead. Here we have a life, and work. Of course we will help."

So they considered, and, at length, decided.

And their meeting and consideration and decision took four microseconds.

* * *

THE six people looked at one another, entranced, dazed.

"It's—gone," said Jon. He wondered, then, what he meant by that.

Henry's fingers slid off the keys, and the big bass was silent. Priscilla opened her tilted eyes wide and looked about her. Edie pressed close to Jonathan, bright-faced, composed. Jane stood with her head high, her nostrils arched.

They felt as if they were suddenly living on a new plane of existence, where colors were more vivid and the hues between them more recognizable. There was a new richness to the air, and a new strength in their bodies; but most of all it was as if a curtain had been lifted

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from their minds for the first time in their lives. They had all reached a high unity, a supreme harmony in the music a second before, but this was something different, infinitely more complete. "Cured" was the word that came to Jonathan. He knew instinctively that what he now felt was a new norm, and that it was humanity's birthright.

"My goodness gracious!"

Verna and Pallas stood close together, like two frightened birds, darting glances about them and twittering.

"I can't think what I'm doing here," said Pallas blankly, yet aware. "I've had one of my spells . . ."

"We both have," Verna agreed. "And that's the way it is."

Jonathan looked at them, and knew them instantly as incomplete.

He raised his eyes to the rest of the people in the club, still stirring with the final rustle of applause from the magnificent burst of music they had heard, and he recognized them as sick. His mind worked with a new directiveness and brilliance to the causes of their sickness.

He turned to Edie. "We have work to do . . ."

She pressed his hand, and Priscilla looked up and smiled.

Derek and Jane looked into each other's eyes, into depths neither had dreamed of before. There would be music from that, they knew.

Henry said, with all his known gentleness and none of the frightened diffidence, "Hey, you with the red hair. I love you. What's your name?" And Priscilla laughed with a sound like wings and buried her face in his shoulder.

ON EARTH there was a new kind of partnership of three. And . . .

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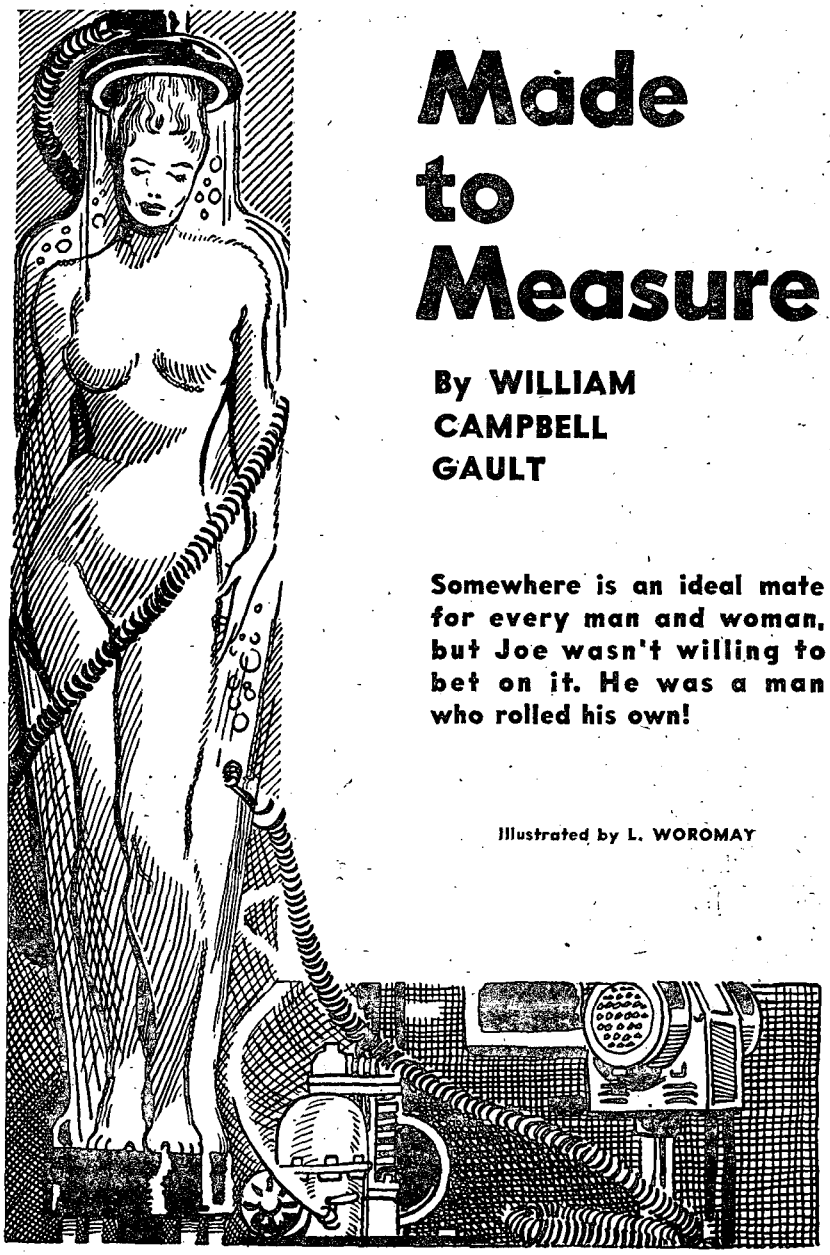

Made to Measure

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

Somewhere is an ideal mate for every man and woman, but Joe wasn't willing to bet on it. He was a man who rolled his own!

Illustrated by L. WOROMAY

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THE pressure tube locks clicked behind them, as the train moved on. It was a strange, sighing click and to Joe it sounded like, "She's not right—she's not right—she's not right—"

So, finally, he said it. "She's not right."

Sam, who was riding with him, looked over wonderingly. "Who isn't?"

"Vera. My wife. She's not right."

Sam frowned. "Are you serious, Joe? You mean she's—?" He tapped his temple.

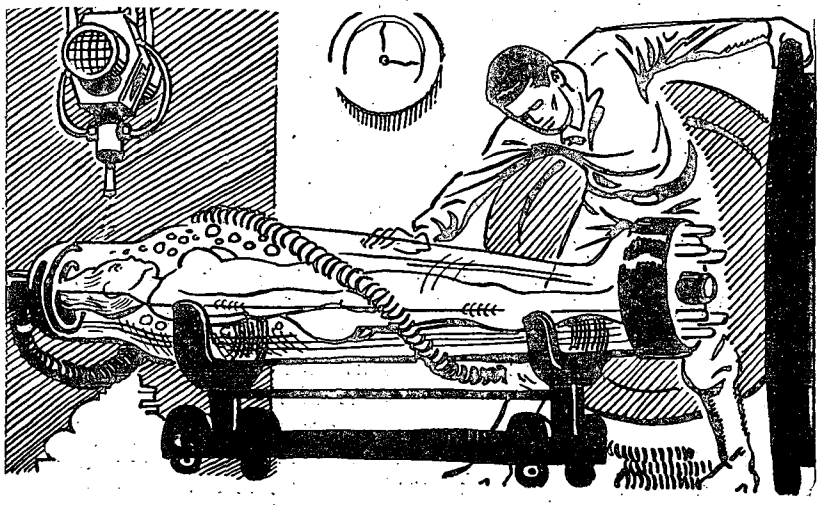
"Oh, no. I mean she's not what I want."

"That's why we have the Center," Sam answered, as if quoting, which he was. "With the current and growing preponderance of women over men, something had to be done. I think we've done it."

Sam was the Director of the Domestic Center and a man sold on his job.

"You've done as well as you could," Joe agreed in an argumentative way. "You've given some reason and order to the marital competition among women. You've almost eliminated illicit relations. You've established a basic security for the kids. But the big job? You've missed it completely."

"Thanks," Sam said. "That's a very small knife you've inserted between my shoulder blades, but I'm thin-skinned." He took a deep breath. "What, in the opinion of the Junior Assistant to the Adju-



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tant Science Director, was the *big* job?"

Joe looked for some scorn in Sam's words, found it, and said, "The big job is too big for a sociologist."

Sam seemed to flinch. "I didn't think that axe would fit alongside the knife. I underestimated you."

"No offense," Joe said. "It's just that you have to deal with human beings."

"Oh," Sam said. "Now it comes. You know, for a minute I forgot who you were. I forgot you were the greatest living authority on robots. I was thinking of you as my boyhood chum, good old Joe. You're beyond that now, aren't you?"

"Beyond my adolescence? I hope so, though very few people are." Joe looked at Sam squarely. "Every man wants a perfect wife, doesn't he?"

Sam shrugged. "I suppose."

"And no human is perfect, so no man gets a perfect wife. Am I right, so far?"

"Sounds like it."

"Okay." Joe tapped Sam's chest with a hard finger. "I'm going to make a perfect wife." He tapped his own chest. "For me, just for me, the way I want her. No human frailties. Ideal."

"A perfect robot," Sam objected.

"A wife," Joe corrected. "A person. A human being."

"But without a brain."

"With a brain. Do you know anything about cybernetics, Sam?"

"I know just as much about cybernetics as you know about people. Nothing."

"THAT'S not quite fair. I'm not sentimental about people, but it's inaccurate to say I don't know anything about them. *I'm* a person. I think I'm—discerning and sensitive."

"Sure," Sam said. "Let's drop the subject."

"Why?"

"Because you're talking nonsense. A person without faults is not a person. And if—it or he—she were, I don't think I'd care to know him or her or it."

"Naturally. You're a sentimentalist. You've seen so much misery, so much human error, so much stupidity that you've built up your natural tolerance into a sloppy and unscientific sentimentality. It happens to sociologists all the time."

"Joe, I'm not going to argue with you. Only one thing I ask. When you—break the news to Vera, break it gently. And get her back to the Center as quickly as you can. She's a choice, rare number."

Joe said nothing to that. Sam looked miserable. They sat there, listening to the swishing, burring clicks of the airlocks, two friends —one who dealt with people and had grown soft, the other who dealt with machines and might not have grown at all.

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As the car rose for the Inglewood station, Sam looked over, but Joe's eyes were straight ahead. Sam got up and out of the seat.

There was a whispering sigh of escaping air and the sunlight glare of the Inglewood station, synthetic redwood and chrome and marble.

Sam was out of the cylindrical, stainless steel car and hurrying for the Westchester local when Joe came out onto the platform. Sam was annoyed, it was plain.

Joe's glance went from his hurrying friend to the parking lot, and his coupe was there with Vera behind the wheel. It was only a three block walk, but she had to be there to meet him, every evening. That was her major fault, her romantic sentimentality.

"Darling," she said, as he approached the coupe. "Sweetheart. Have a good day?"

He kissed her casually. "Ordinary." She slid over and he climbed in behind the wheel. "Sat with Sam Tullgren on the train."

"Sam's nice."

He turned on the ignition and said, "Start." The motor obediently started and he swung out of the lot, onto Chestnut. "Sam's all right. Kind of sentimental."

"That's what I mean."

JOE was silent. The coupe went past a row of solar homes and turned on Fulsom. Three houses from the corner, he turned into their driveway.

"You're awfully quiet," Vera said.

"I'm thinking."

"About what?" Her voice was suddenly strained. "Sam didn't try to sell you—"

"A new wife?" He looked at her. "What makes you think that?"

"You're thinking about me, about trading me in. Joe, haven't I—darling, is there—?" She broke off, looking even more miserable than Sam had.

"I don't intend to trade you in," he said quietly.

She took a deep breath.

He didn't look at her. "But you're going back to the Center."

She stared at him, a film of moisture in her eyes. She didn't cry or ask questions or protest. Joe wished she would. This was worse.

"It's not your fault," he said, after a moment. "I'm not going to get another. You're as ideal, almost, as a human wife can ever be."

"I've tried so hard," she said. "Maybe I tried too hard."

"No," he said, "it isn't your fault. Any reasonable man would be delighted with you, Vera. You won't be at the Center long."

"I don't want a reasonable man," she said quietly. "I want you, Joe. I—I loved you."

He had started to get out of the car. He paused to look back. "Loved? Did you use the past tense?"

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"I used the past tense." She started to get out on her side of the car. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But I do," he told her. "Is this love something you can turn on and off like a faucet?"

"I don't care to explain it to you," she said. "I've got to pack." She left the car, slammed the door, and moved hurriedly toward the house.

Joe watched her. Something was troubling him, something he couldn't analyze, but he felt certain that if he could, it would prove to be absurd.

He went thoughtfully into the living room and snapped on the telenews. He saw troops moving by on foot, a file of them dispersed along a Brazilian road. He turned the knob to another station and saw the huge stock market board, a rebroadcast. Another twist and he saw a disheveled, shrieking woman being transported down some tenement steps by a pair of policemen. The small crowd on the sidewalk mugged into the camera.

He snapped it off impatiently and went into the kitchen. The dinette was a glass-walled alcove off this, and the table was set. There was food on his plate, none on Vera's.

HE WENT to the living room and then, with a mutter of impatience, to the door of the back bedroom. She had her grips open on the low bed.

"You don't have to leave tonight, you know."

"I know."

"You're being very unreasonable."

"Am I?"

"I wasn't trying to be intentionally cruel."

"Weren't you?"

His voice rose. "Will you stop talking like some damned robot? Are you a human being, or aren't you?"

"I'm afraid I am," she said, "and that's why I'm going back to the Center. I've changed my mind. I want to get registered. I want to find a *man*."

She started to go past him, her grip in her hand. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Vera, you—"

Something flashed toward his face. It was her slim, white hand, but it didn't feel slim and white. She said, "I can see now why you weren't made *Senior* Assistant to the Adjutant Science Director. You're a stupid, emotionless mechanic. A machine."

He was still staring after her when the door slammed. He thought of the huge Domestic Center with its classes in Allure, Boudoir Manners, Diet, Poise, Budgeting. That vast, efficient, beautifully decorated Center which was the brain child of Sam Tullgren, but which still had to deal with imperfect humans.

People, people, people . . . and particularly women. He rose, after

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a while, and went into the dinette. He sat down and stared moodily at his food.

Little boys are made of something and snails and puppydogs' tails. What are little girls made of? Joe didn't want a little girl; he wanted one about a hundred and twenty-two pounds and five feet, four inches high. He wanted her to be flat where she should be and curved where she should be, with blonde hair and gray-green eyes and an exciting smile.

He had a medical degree, among his others. The nerves, muscles, flesh, circulatory system could be made—and better than they were ever made naturally. The brain would be cybernetic and fashioned after his own, with his own mental background stored in the memory circuits.

So far, of course, he had described nothing more than a robot of flesh and blood. The spark, now—what distinguished the better-grade robots from people? Prenatal heat, that was it. Incubation. A mold, a heated mold. Warmth, the spark, the sun, life.

FOR the skin, he went to Pete Celano, the top syntho-dermatologist in the Department.

"Something special?" Pete asked. "Not just a local skin graft? What then?"

"A wife. A perfect wife."

Pete's grin sagged bafflledly. "I don't get it, Joe. Perfect how?"

"In all ways." Joe's face was grave. "Someone ideal to live with."

"How about Vera? What was wrong with her?"

"A sentimentalist, too romantic, kind of—well, maybe not dumb, exactly, but—"

"But not perfect. Who is, Joe?"

"My new wife is going to be."

Pete shrugged and began putting together the ingredients for the kind of skin Joe had specified.

They're all the same, Joe thought, Sam and Pete and the rest. They seemed to think his idea childish. He built the instillers and incubator that night. The mold would be done by one of the Department's engravers. Joe had the sketches and dimensions ready.

Wednesday afternoon, Burke called him in. Burke was the Senior assistant, a job Joe had expected and been miffed about. Burke was a jerk, in Joe's book.

This afternoon, Burke's long nose was twitching and his thin face was gravely bleak. He had a clipped, efficient way of speaking.

"Tired, Joe?"

"What do you mean?"

"Not hitting the ball, not on the beam, no zipperoo."

"I'm—yes, I guess you're right. I've been working at home on a private project."

"Scientific?"

"Naturally."

"Anything in particular?"

Joe took a breath, looked away,

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and back at Burke. "Well, a wife."

A frown, a doubtful look from the cold, blue eyes. "Robot? Dishwasher and cook and phone answerer and like that?"

"More than that."

Slightly raised eyebrows.

"More?"

"Competely human, except she will have no human faults."

Cool smile. "Wouldn't be human, then, of course."

"Human, but without human faults, I said!"

"You raised your voice, Joe."

"I did."

"I'm the Senior Assistant. Junior Assistants do not raise their voices to Senior Assistants."

"I thought you might be deaf, as well as dumb," Joe said.

A silence. The granite face of Burke was marble, then steel and finally chromium. His voice matched it. "I'll have to talk to the Chief before I fire you, of course. Department rule. Good afternoon."

"Go to hell."

JOE went back to his desk and burned. He started with a low flame and fed it with the grievances of the past weeks. When it began to warm his collar, he picked up his hat and left.

Click, burr, click went the airlocks. Very few riders, this time of the afternoon. The brain would go in, intact, and then the knowledge instiller would work during the incubation period, feeding the adolescent memories to the retentive circuits. She would really spend her mental childhood in the mold, while the warmth sent the human spark through her body.

Robot? Huh! What did they know? A human being, a product of science, a *flawless* human being.

The rise, the big hiss of the final airlock, and Inglewood. Joe stood on the platform a second, looking for his car, and then realized she wasn't there. She hadn't been there for a week, and he'd done that every night. Silly thing, habit. Human trait.

Tonight, he'd know. The flesh had been in the mold for two days. The synthetic nerves were plump and white under the derma-ray, the fluxo heart was pumping steadily, the entire muscular structure kept under pneumatic massage for muscle tone.

He'd thought of omitting the frowning muscles, but realized it would ruin the facial contours. They weren't, however, under massage and would not be active.

And the mind?

Well, naturally it would be tuned to his. She'd know everything he knew. What room was there for disagreement if the minds were the same? Smiling, as she agreed, because she couldn't frown. Her tenderness, her romanticism would have an intensity variable, of course. He didn't want one of these grinning simperers.

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He remembered his own words: "Is this love something you can turn on and off like a faucet?" Were his own words biting him, or only scratching him? Something itched. An intensity variable was not a faucet, though unscientific minds might find a crude, allegorical resemblance.

To hell with unscientific minds.

He went down to the basement. The mold was 98.6. He watched the knowledge instiller send its minute current to the head end of the mold. The meter read less than a tenth of an amp. The slow, plastic pulse of the muscle tone massage worked off a small pump near the foot of the mold.

On the wall, the big master operating clock sent the minute currents to the various bodily sections, building up the cells, maintaining the organic functions. In two hours, the clock would shut off all power, the box would cool, and there would be his—Alice. Well, why not Alice? She had to have a name, didn't she?

WARMTH, that was the difference between a human and a robot, just warmth, just the spark. Funny he'd never thought of it before. Warmth was—it had unscientific connotations. It wasn't, though.

He went upstairs and fried some eggs. Twice a day, for a week, he had fried eggs. Their flavor was overrated.

Then he went into the living room and snapped on the ball game.

Martin was on third and Pelter was at bat. On the mound, the lank form of Dorffberger cast a long, grotesque shadow in the afternoon sun. Dorffberger chewed and spat and wiped his nose with the back of his glove. He looked over at third and yawned.

At the plate, Pelter was digging in. Pelter looked nervous.

Joe said, "Bet that Dorffberger fans him. He's got the Indian sign on Pelter."

Then he realized he was talking to himself. Damn it. On the telenews screen, Dorffberger looked right into the camera and nodded. He was winding up, and the director put the ball into slow motion. Even in slow motion, it winged.

"Ho-ho!" Joe said. "You can't hit what you can't see."

Pelter must have seen it. He caught it on the fat part of the bat, twisting into it with all his hundred and ninety pounds. The impact rattled the telenews screen and the telescopic cameras took over. They followed the ball's flight about halfway to Jersey and then the short-range eyes came back to show Pelter crossing the plate, and Martin waiting there to shake his hand.

Joe snapped off the machine impatiently. Very unscientific game, baseball. No rhyme or reason to it. He went out onto the porch.

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The grass was dry and gray; he'd forgotten to set the sprinkler clock, Vera's old job. Across the street, Dan Harvey sat with his wife, each with a drink. Sat with his human wife, the poor fish. They looked happy, though. Some people were satisfied with mediocrities. Unscientific people.

Why was he restless? Why was he bored? Was he worried about his job? Only slightly; the Chief thought a lot of him, a hell of a lot. The Chief was a great guy for seniority and Burke had it, or Joe would certainly have been Senior Assistant.

The stirring in him he didn't want to analyze and he thought of the days he'd courted Vera, going to dances at the Center, playing bridge at the Center, studying Greek at the Center. A fine but too well-lighted place. You could do everything but smooch there; the smooching came after the declaration of intentions and a man was bound after the declaration to go through with the wedding, to live with his chosen mate for the minimum three months of the adjustment period.

ADJUSTMENT period . . . another necessity for humans, for imperfect people. Across the street, the perfectly adjusted Harveys smiled at each other and sipped their drinks. Hell, that wasn't adjustment, that was surrender.

He got up and went into the living room; fighting the stirring in him, the stirring he didn't want to analyze and find absurd. He went into the bathroom and studied his lean, now haggard face. He looked like hell. He went into the back bedroom and smelled her perfume and went quickly from the house and into the backyard.

He sat there until seven, listening to the throb from the basement. The molecule agitator should have the flesh firm and finished now, nourished by the select blood, massaged by the pulsating plastic.

At seven, she should be ready.

At seven, he went down to the basement. His heart should have been hammering and his mind expectant, but he was just another guy going down to the basement.

The pumps had stopped, the agi-

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tator, the instiller. He felt the mold; it was cool to the touch. He lifted the lid, his mind on Vera for some reason.

A beauty. The lid was fully back and his mate sat up, smiled and said, "Hello, Joe."

"Hello, Alice. Everything all right?"

"Fine."

Her hair was a silver blonde, her features a blend of the patrician and the classical. Her figure was neither too slim nor too stout, too flat nor too rounded. Nowhere was there any sag.

"Thought we'd drop over to the Harveys' for a drink," Joe said. "Sort of show you off, you know."

"Ego gratification, Joe?"

"Of course. I've some clothes upstairs for you."

"I'm sure they're lovely."

"They are lovely."

While she dressed, he phoned the Harveys. He explained about Vera first, because Vera was what the Harveys considered a good neighbor.

Dan Harvey said sympathetically, "It happens to the best of us. Thinking of getting a new one, Joe?"

"I've got one right here. Thought I'd drop over, sort of break the ice."

"Great," Dan said. "Fine. Dandy."

The event was of minor importance, except for the revelation involved.

The Harveys had a gift for putting guests at ease, the gift being a cellar full of thirty-year-old bourbon the elder Harvey had bequeathed them at the end of their adjustment period.

The talk moved here and there, over the bourbon, Alice sharing in it rarely, though nodding when Joe was talking.

Then, at mention of someone or other, Mrs. Harvey said tolerantly, "Well, none of us are perfect, I guess."

Alice smiled and answered, "Some of us are satisfied with mediocrities in marriage."

Mrs. Harvey frowned doubtfully. "I don't quite understand, dear. In any marriage, there has to be adjustment. Dan and I, for example, have adjusted very well."

"You haven't adjusted," Alice

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said smilingly. "You've surrendered."

Joe coughed up half a glass of bourbon, Dan turned a sort of red-green and Mrs. Harvey stared with her mouth open. Alice smiled.

Finally, Mrs. Harvey said, "Well, I never—"

"Of all the—" Dan Harvey said.

Joe rose and said, "Must get to bed, got to get to bed."

"Here?" Alice asked.

"No, of course not. Home. Let's go, dear. Have to rush."

Alice's smile had nothing sentimental about it.

HE DIDN'T berate her until morning. He wanted time to cool off, to look at the whole thing objectively. It just wouldn't get objective, though.

At breakfast, he said, "That was tactless last night. Very, very tactless."

"Yes, Joe. Tact requires deception. Tact is essentially deception."

When had he said that? Oh, yes, at the Hydra Club lecture. And it was true, and he hated deception and he'd created a wife without one.

He said, "I'll have to devise a character distiller that won't require putting you back in the mold."

"Of course, dear. Why?"

"You need just a touch of deception, just a wee shade of it."

"Of course, Joe."

So she had tact.

He went to the office with very little of the absurdity mood stirring in him. He'd had a full breakfast, naturally.

At the office, there was a note on his desk: *Mr. Behrens wants to see you immediately.* It bore his secretary's initials. Mr. Behrens was the Chief.

He was a fairly short man with immense shoulders and what he'd been told was a classical head. So he let his hair grow, and had a habit of thrusting his chin forward when he listened. He listened to Joe's account of the interview with Burke.

When Joe had finished, the Chief's smile was tolerant. "Ribbing him, were you? Old Burke hasn't much sense of humor, Joe."

Joe said patiently, "I wasn't ribbing him. I took her out of the mold last night. I ate breakfast with her this morning. She's—beautiful, Chief. She's ideal."

The Chief looked at him for seconds, his head tilted.

Joe said, "Heat, that's what does it. If you'd like to come for dinner with us tonight, Chief, and see for yourself—"

The Chief nodded. "I'd like that."

THEY left a little early to avoid the crowd in the tube. Burke saw them leaving, and his long face grew even longer.

On the trip, Joe told his boss about the cybernetic brain, about

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his background and his beliefs stored in the memory circuits, and the boss listened quietly, not committing himself with any comments.

But he did say, "I certainly thought a lot of Vera. You wouldn't have to warm her in any incubating mold."

"Wait'll you see this one," Joe said.

And when she walked into the living room at home, when she acknowledged the introduction to the Chief, Joe knew the old boy was sold. The Chief could only stare.

Joe took him down to the basement then to show him the molecule agitator, the memory feeder, the instillers.

The old boy looked it over and said, quite simply, "I'll be damned!"

They went up to a perfect dinner—and incident number two.

The Chief was a sentimentalist and he'd just lost a fine friend. This friend was his terrier, Murph, who'd been hit by a speeding car.

The story of Murph from birth to death was a fairly long one, but never dull. The Chief had a way with words. Even Joe, one of the world's top-ranking non-sentimentalists, was touched by the tale. When they came to the end, where Murph had lain in his master's arms, whimpering, as though to comfort him, trying to lick his face, Joe's eyes were wet and the drink wobbled in his hand.

The Chief finished in a whisper, and looked up from the carpet he'd been staring at through the account.

And there was Alice, sitting erect, a smile of perfect joy on her face. "How touching," she said, and grinned.

For one horror-stricken second, the Chief glared at her, and then his questioning eyes went to Joe.

"She can't frown," Joe explained. "The muscles are there, but they need massage to bring them to life." He paused. "I wanted a smiling wife."

The Chief inhaled heavily. "There are times when a smile is out of order, don't you think, Joe?"

"It seems that way."

It didn't take long. Massage, orientation, practice, concentration. It didn't take long, and she was so willing to cooperate. Golly, she was agreeable. She was more than that; she voiced his thoughts before he did. Because of the mental affinity, you see. He'd made sure of that.

She could frown now and she had enough deception to get by in almost any company. These flaws were necessary, but they were still flaws and brought her closer to being—human.

AT THE office on Saturday morning, Sam Tullgren dropped in. Sam said, "I've been hearing things, Joseph."

"From Vera? At the Center?"

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Sam shook his head. "Vera's been too busy to have much time for the director. She's our most popular number." Sam paused. "About the new one. Hear she's something to see."

"You heard right. She's practically flawless, Sam. She's just what a man needs at home." His voice, for some reason, didn't indicate the enthusiasm he should have felt.

Sam chewed one corner of his mouth. "Why not bring her over, say, tonight? We'll play some bridge."

That would be something. Two minds, perfectly in harmony, synchronized, working in partnership. Joe's smile was smug. "We'll be there. At eight-thirty."

Driving over to Westchester that night, Joe told Alice, "Sam's a timid bidder. His wife's inclined to overbid. Plays a sacrificing game when she knows it will gain points. Our job will be to make her oversacrifice."

Sam's eyes opened at sight of her; his wife's narrowed. Joe took pride in their reaction, but it was a strange, impersonal pride.

They had a drink and some small talk, and settled around the table. It was more like a seance than a game.

They bid and made four clubs, a heart. Sam's wife got that determined look. With the opposition holding down one leg of the rubber, she figured to make the next bid a costly one.

She won it with six diamonds, and went down nine tricks, doubled. Sam started to say something, after the debacle, but one look at his wife's anguished countenance stopped him short of audibility.

Sam said consolingly, "I'm such a lousy bidder, dear. I must have given you the wrong idea of my hand."

NEXT time, Sam made up for his timidity. Sam, with one heart in his hand, tried a psychic. "One heart," he said firmly.

Sam knew there was a good chance the hearts were in the oppositions' hands, and this looked like a fine defensive tactic.

However, his wife, with a three-suit powerhouse, couldn't conceive of a psychic from Sam. She had need of only a second round stopper in hearts and a small slam in no trump was in the bag. She had no hearts, but timid Sam was undoubtedly holding the ace-king.

She bid six no-trump, which was conservative for her. She didn't want to make the mistake of having Sam let the bid die.

Joe had the ace, king, queen and jack of hearts and a three to lead to Alice's hand. Alice finished up the hearts for a total of seven tricks, and this time it was Mrs. Tullgren who opened her mouth to speak.

But she remembered Sam's kindness in the former hand, and she said, "It was all my fault, darling.

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To think I couldn't recognize a psychic, just because it came from you. I think we're overmatched, sweet." She paused to smile at Joe. "Up against the man who invented the comptin-reduco-determina." She added, as an afterthought, "And his charming, brilliant new wife."

Which brought about incident number three.

Alice turned to Mrs. Tullgren sweetly and asked, "Don't you really understand the comptin-reduco-determina?"

"Not even faintly," Mrs. Tullgren answered. She smiled at Alice.

The smile faded after about ten minutes. For Alice was telling her *all* about the comptin-reduco-determina. For an hour and nineteen minutes, Alice talked to this woman who had been humiliated twice, telling her all the things about the famous thinking machine that Mrs. Tullgren didn't want to know.

It wasn't until Alice was through talking animatedly that the entranced Joe began to suspect that perhaps the Tullgrens weren't as interested in the dingus as a scientific mind would assume.

They weren't. There was a strain after that, a decided heaviness to the rest of the evening. Sam seemed to sigh with relief when they said good night.

In the car, Joe was thoughtful. Halfway home, he said, "Darling, I think you know too much—for a female, that is. I think you'll have to have a go with the knowledge-instiller. In reverse, of course."

"Of course," she agreed.

"I don't object to females knowing a lot. The world does."

"Of course," she said.

She was a first model and, therefore, experimental. These bugs were bound to show up. She was now less knowing, more deceptive, and she could frown.

She began to remind him of Vera, which didn't make sense.

Alice was sad when he was sad, gay when he was gay, and romantic to the same split-degree in the same split-second. She even told him his old jokes with the same inflection he always used.

Their mood affinity was geared as closely as the comptin-reduco-determina. What more could a man want? And, damn it, why should Vera's perfume linger in that back bedroom?

THE fumigators could do nothing. They left, after the third trip, shaking their heads. Joe stood in the doorway, insisting he could still smell it.

Alice said, "It's probably mental, dear. Perhaps you still—still—what's that word? Perhaps you still love her."

"How could you think that?" he asked. "How? How could you think that unless I was thinking it?"

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"I couldn't. I love you, too, Joe, but you know why that is."

"What do you mean?"

"We both love you, Joe."

"Both? You and Vera?"

"No. You and I, we both love *you.*"

"That," said Joe peevishly, "is ridiculous. If you could think for yourself, you'd know it was ridiculous."

"Of course," she agreed. And frowned, because he was frowning.

"You act like a robot," Joe said.

She nodded.

"That's all you are," Joe went on evenly, "a robot. No volition."

She nodded, frowning.

"I'm sick of it."

She said nothing, sympathetically looking sick.

And then he smiled and said, "I'm not stumped. Not the inventor of the comptin-reduco-determina. By Harry, I'll give you volition. I'll give you enough volition to make you dizzy."

And because he was smiling, she was smiling. And only a very perceptive person might notice that her smile seemed to have an intensity, an anticipation slightly beyond his.

He got to work on it that night. He would have to erase some of his mental background from her brain. He wanted her no less intelligent, no less discerning, but with enough of a change in background to give her a viewpoint of her own. He labored until midnight, and tumbled into bed with a headache.

Next morning, at breakfast, he told her, "We'll try it out tonight. After that, you'll be a person."

"Of course. And will you love me, Joe?"

"More coffee, please," he answered.

At the office, there was another note from his secretary: *Mr. Burke wants to see you. At your convenience.*

At your convenience? Was Burke going soft? Joe went right in.

BURKE was smiling, a miracle in itself. Burke's voice was jovial. "The Chief's been telling me about the new wife, Joe. I guess I owe you an apology."

"Not at all," Joe said. "I had no right to be rude. I was a little overworked—at home. I wasn't myself."

Burke nodded smugly, soaking it up. "Beautiful, the Chief tells me. Am I going to meet her, Joe?"

"If you want. How about tonight, for dinner? I've got something new planned. I'm giving her volition. Maybe you'll want to watch."

"Volition?"

Joe went on to explain about volition, making it as simple as he could, to match Burke's mind.

"That," Burke said when he'd finished, "I want to see."

They went home in the crowded

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Inglewood tube. Sam was there, but Sam seemed to avoid them, for some reason. All the way home, Joe had the uncomfortable feeling that Burke didn't believe any part of this business, that Burke was making the trip only to substantiate his own misconceptions.

But when Alice came into the living room, smiling brightly, extending her hand to the Senior Assistant, Joe had a gratifying glimpse of Burke's face.

Burke was lost. Burke stared and swallowed and grinned like a green stage hand at a burlesque show. Burke's smile was perpetual and nauseating. Even in the face of Alice's cool reserve.

The dinner was fine, the liquor mellow.

Then Joe said, "Well, Alice, it's time for the volition. It's time for your *birth* as a person."

"Of course," she said, and smiled.

They went down into the basement, the three of them; she sat in the chair he'd prepared and he clamped on the wired helmet and adjusted the electrodes.

Burke said weakly, "It isn't—dangerous, is it?"

"Dangerous?" Joe stared at him. "Of course not. Remember how I explained it?"

"I—uh—my memory—" Burke subsided.

She closed her eyes and smiled. Joe threw the switch. She'd have knowledge; she'd have the memory of her past few days of existence as his alter ego. She'd have volition.

The contact clock took over. Her eyes remained closed, but her smile began to fade as the second hand moved around and around the big, contact-studded dial.

Joe was smiling, though she wasn't. Joe was filled with a sense of his own creative power, his own inventive genius and gratification at the worried frown on the face of the imbecile Burke.

THEN the clock stopped and there was a buzz; the meters dropped to zero. Alice opened her eyes. For the first time, as a *person*, she opened her eyes.

Her smile was back. But she was looking at Burke. Looking at Burke and smiling!

"Baby," she said.

Burke looked puzzled, but definitely pleased. In all Burke's adult life, no female had ever looked at him like that.

Joe said tolerantly, "You're a little confused yet, Alice. *I'm* your husband."

"You?" She stared at him. "Do you think I've forgotten you? Do you think I don't know you, after living inside your brain, almost? You *monster*, you egocentric, selfish, humorless walking equation. You're not my husband and I'd like to see you prove that you are."

Now it was only Burke who smiled. "By George," he said,

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"that's right. There's no wedding on record, is there, Joe?"

"Wedding?" Joe repeated blankly. "I made her. I created her. Of course there's no—"

"Of course, of course, of course," Alice shrilled. "That's all you know. You're the 'original 'of course' kid. Things aren't that certain, Junior. I've known you just long enough and just well enough to detest you." Now she pointed at Burke. "*That's* what I want. That's my kind of man."

Burke gulped and grinned, nodded. "To coin a phrase, you said it, kiddo." He smiled at Joe. "I'll run her right down to the Center and get her registered, and take out an intent option. I guess we can't fight fate, Joe, can we?"

Joe took a deep breath of air. "I guess not. I guess it's—kismet."

He was still standing there when he heard the front door slam. He kept staring at the machine, not seeing it, hearing instead all she had said. She knew him better than anyone who lived. Better, actually, than he knew himself, because she didn't rationalize, being outside his mental sphere now. You might say she'd been in his mind and detested what she had found there.

It was a crawling feeling, the knowledge that he had been guilty of rationalization himself, that he had faults his mind refused to acknowledge. He couldn't doubt that he was all the cold and gruesome things she had called him. The worst shock, however, was that he had studied psychology and honestly had believed he was an objective thinker.

But who, he realized, could be completely honest about himself?

HE LOOKED at the machine and saw the non-rationalization electrodes. He had used that on her and she had seen clearly what he still couldn't recognize. What he needed, apparently, was a good, objective look at his own mind.

He set the contact clock for ob-

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jectivity maximum and clamped the electrodes on his head. He reached for the switch, had to close his eyes before he could throw it.

He didn't see the second hand going around and around the clock, but he felt the prejudice-erasing impulses, the objective-appraisal stimuli, revealing memories that had shaped him, humiliations that had twisted him and been forgotten, urgings and longings and guilts that he had never known existed.

He saw himself. It was highly unpleasant.

There was a final buzz and the clock stopped. Joe opened his eyes, both figuratively and literally. He unclamped the helmet with the electrodes and stepped from the chair, holding onto the arm, looking at the mirrored inside walls of the mold.

He had made an image of himself and it had turned on him. Now he had made—what? An image of his image's image of him? It was very confusing, yet somehow clear.

He went slowly up the stairs, smelling the perfume. It wasn't Alice's and that was peculiar, because she had practically swabbed herself with the stuff, knowing he liked it, and she had just left.

It was Vera's perfume.

He remembered her waiting at the station, making her ridiculous bids at the card table, gossiping witlessly with Mrs. Harvey, hitting her thumb when she tried to hang his pictures in the study.

Vera . . .

He prowled dissatisfiedly through the house, as though in search of something, and then went out to the car. He took the superpike almost all the way to the Center. There were bright cards on posts every few hundred feet:

IT'S NOT TOO LATE
TO GET A MATE
THE GIRLS ARE GREAT
AT THE DOMESTIC CENTER

He pulled into the sweeping circular drive at the huge group of

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buildings. A troupe of singing girls came out, dressed in majorette costumes, opened the door, helped him out, parked the car, escorted him into the lavish reception room. Music came from somewhere, soft and moody. There were murals all over the walls, every one romantic. A dispensing machine held engagement and wedding rings with a series of finger-holes on the left side for matching sizes.

THE matron recognized him and said, "Mr. Tullgren has gone home for the day. Is there anything I can do?"

He told her what he wanted and she thumbed through a register.

"Yes, she's still here," the matron said finally. "She's refused exactly thirty-two offers up to yesterday. You were thinking of a—reconciliation?"

Joe nodded with a new humility. "If she'll have me."

The matron smiled. "I think she will. Women are more understanding than men, usually. More romantic, you might say."

Nine-tenths of the building was brightly lighted, one-tenth rather dim. In the dim tenth were the post-intent rooms, the reconciliation chambers.

Joe sat on a yellow love-seat in one of the empty reconciliation chambers, leafing through, but not seeing, a copy of a fashion magazine. Then there were steps in the hall, familiar steps, and he smelled the perfume before she came in.

She stood timidly at the archway, but Joe was even more unsure and weak in the legs and he had trouble with his breathing.

"Joe," Vera said.

"Vera," he answered.

It wasn't much, but it seemed to be what both had in mind.

"Was there something you wanted to tell me?" she asked. "Something important?"

"It's important to me, Vera," he said humbly. "I hope it's just as important to you."

She looked brightly at him.

"I find it very difficult to put into words," he stumbled. "The usual expressions of this emotion are so hackneyed. I would like to find some other way to say it."

"Say what?"

"That I love you."

She ran to him. The impact knocked the breath out of both of them, but neither noticed.

"Isn't the old phrase good enough, silly?" she scolded and kissed him. "I love you too, lover baby."

Behind them, at the key words, the sonic-signal closed the hidden doors in the archway and they were alone in the reconciliation chamber.

Joe discovered that Sam Tullgren, Director of the Domestic Center, had thought of everything to make reconciliations complete.

—WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

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Susceptibility

By JOHN D. McDONALD

SEAN MALLOY stood unnoticed at the edge of the clearing and frowned as he watched the girl work. Exposure to the rays of the yellow-white sun, half again the size of Sol, had turned her to copper bronze, against which the mane of yellow hair was quite startling. He found that he was taking pleasure in watching the smooth play of muscles in her naked back as she swung the instrument against the tree. Each stroke bit out a chunk of the soft yellowish wood, veined with green. Exertion had put a sheen of perspiration on her shoulders.

The proper paleolingual word eluded him. Suddenly he remembered. Of course—it was an ax.

The sound of it, biting into the wood, resounded across the clearing, a sharp, metronomic sound. He heard the crackle of fibers and saw her step back from the tree. Sean Malloy glanced up then, and saw the great mass of branches and

Illustrated by JAMES VINCENT

The colonists on this world needed help urgently. It was as if they had deliberately decided to set their civilization back to some harsh era out of the past!

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leaves sway toward him. He gave a gasp of alarm, and forgetting all the dignity of a Praecursor from the Colonial Adjustments Bureau, he ran at right angles to the line of fall. After fifty feet of surprising fleetness, he struck a hummock of grass and fell just at the moment the tree thundered to the ground, so close behind him that the end of a branch rapped him smartly across the shoulders. He crawled out from under the leaves and stood up. The tall woman was hurrying toward him, buttoning on a shirt of coarse fabric, quick concern in her eyes.

"You're not hurt?"

"It so happens that I'm not," he said acidly.

He saw her glance take in his uniform, the CAB seal, the tiny gold question mark of the Praecursor blazoned upon it. She no longer looked concerned.

"People who wait for trees to fall on them generally get hurt," she said indifferently.

"I am Sean Malloy, Praecursor. They told me, in the village, that I should talk to you. You *are* Deen Thomason?"

She nodded. She looked regretfully at the tree. "I suppose I can just as well finish it tomorrow. Come along, Malloy."

She shouldered the ax and headed across the clearing to the mouth of a narrow trail. Her stride was long. Once again Malloy found himself taking a rather surprising pleasure in watching her. He made a mental note to apply, on his return to the Bureau, for deep psychological analysis. Praecursors who became emotionally involved with colonial women suffered a loss of efficiency. It would be wise to have this susceptibility tracked down and eliminated. In the meantime, to take his attention away from the swing of her walk, he asked hastily, "What were you planning to do with the tree, Thomason?"

"Cut off the branches today, saw it tomorrow, then split it and carry the pieces back to my place."

"But why?" he asked, baffled.

SHE stopped so suddenly that he almost ran into her. She turned around and he saw a mixture of amusement and irony in her gray eyes.

"Our winter season is coming, Malloy," she said. "I burn the wood in order to keep warm."

She was almost as tall as he. He said, as though reasoning with a child, "Wouldn't it be much simpler to ask for a heat unit? There's a field station here, an unlimited power source. All you have to do is . . ."

"Of course, Malloy. It just so happens that I'd rather do it this way."

"But . . ."

She had turned again and was striding along the trail. He had to trot to catch up with her. They emerged into a second clearing. A

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crude wooden house sat at the base of a hill, and he was forced to admit that the setting, with the small busy stream foaming through the rocky channel, was superb. Primitive, though.

He followed her to the door of the house. It was open.

"Where is your mate?" he asked, realizing too late that his choice of words had been a bit hasty. It was undiplomatic to point out the backwardness of this unfortunate social order without shrewd preparation.

She looked more amused than angered. "Sit down, Malloy. I have not yet mated, if that's what you Bureau people prefer to call it."

"You built this house yourself?"

"No. I selected the spot. All the others helped me. It was built in two days. The Bureau would have been horrified. Everyone working with their hands. Dancing and food that didn't come from the field station and a strong brew made from fruits. Very barbaric."

He sat at a bench beside a wooden table. She lifted a trap door, went down steps and returned with a corked earthenware jug. She poured a cup of water and handed it to him. The day was warm, the water cool and sweet.

"Thank you," he said. She sat opposite him.

He smiled officially. "Well, shall we get to it, Thomason? It took me a long time to find you. And I didn't expect anyone like you to be . . . head of the planet."

"Let us be accurate, Malloy. This year it happened to be my turn to represent the village at general meeting, and also the turn of my village to supply the chairman for the meeting."

MALLOY gave her a pained look. "My dear young woman, my duty involves contacting the person in charge here. Are you or are you not in charge?"

"If you could say anyone is in charge, I suppose I am."

"Then you keep the records, I gather. Issue orders. Take care of administration."

"There are no records to keep, Malloy. I issued one order, I think. I set the day of the next meeting. And the villages administer themselves."

Malloy stood up, walked to the stone fireplace, turned abruptly. "Please, Thomason. A Praecursor named Zedder was sent here to Able XII seven Earth years ago, five and a half of your years. His job was to find out why the field station was almost unutilized, why there were no entertainment imports, why you were canceled off the tour schedules for lack of business. Zedder came here and put his ship on homing automatic with his resignation fastened to the flight panel. That was so unusual that Able XII was put on emergency priority. Our press of business is so great that this is the first time you have had Bureau contact since then.

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"I came here expecting to find most of the population gone. At first I thought I was right. No one seems to live at the Centers the Bureau built for you people. Then I found you of Able XII living out here in these crude villages and shacks. It has taken me two full weeks to locate you, Thomason. I'm a busy man. A very busy man. The field station is in perfect working order. I've tested it. I projected a perfectly satisfactory little flier, synthesized foods at random from the list that checked perfectly, even used the tele-tubes from Center to Center. My job is to find out what's wrong here, Thomason."

"Does something have to be wrong?" she demanded.

"Don't try my patience, Thomason."

Her gray eyes narrowed a bit. "I can think of very few things I'm more indifferent to, Malloy, than your patience or lack of patience. This is my home. You have all the normal privileges of a guest. An autocratic attitude is not one of those privileges."

He sat down wearily. "I'm sorry. It's just that I'm upset. Where's Zedder?"

"I'm sure I haven't the faintest idea."

"Isn't there any central record of population? Any index?"

"We don't find that necessary, Malloy."

"I can't spare the time to hunt in every village for him. I've got four more emergency priority cases to cover in other parts of the Galaxy."

"Then why don't you just get back into whatever you came here in and go take care of them?"

HE LIFTED his chin. "When the Colonial Bureau sets up proper resident facilities on a planet and stocks the planet with colonists, and when said colonists fail to use the facilities provided, it is the duty of the Colonial Adjustments Bureau to send a Praecursor to make investigation and recommendation as to what sort of adjustment team should be sent to rectify said non-utilization of standard facilities."

She looked amused. "I assume you're quoting from some sort of absurd manual, Malloy. Does it actually use the word 'stock'? As with fish in a pond?"

"There is a case on record where one colonial planet suffered such an emotional degeneration that the colonists acquired a superstitious fear of Center facilities and moved off into the woods."

"And they were adjusted?" Deen Thomason asked mildly.

"Re-educated," Malloy amended.

"That sounds dreadful. Just report, Praecursor, that the inhabitants of Able XII prefer a so-called primitive life, and that the facilities of the Centers and the field station are used when emergencies arise."

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"That will make no sense to the Bureau," he said hotly. "You people live out here in absolute squalor. All the Center homes are empty. Insects have gotten in. Of course they can do no damage, but they have spun webs on the projector dials. It's untidy, a criminal waste. You could move to a Center. Everything you could possibly desire would be no farther from your hand than the nearest dial. It is incomprehensible to me, Thomason, that you should prefer to walk back into the earliest history of your race. Every possible comfort was made available when this colonial planet was set up for . . ."

She raised her hand. "Please, Malloy. Stand up a moment."

He stood up, puzzled. She walked around the table, smiled enigmatically at him and suddenly, clenching her fist, she struck him hard in the diaphragm. He had just enough warning so that he was able to tense his muscles against the blow. Even so, it almost took his breath.

"To strike a Praecursor is . . ."

"Oh, stop being so stuffy! Why are you a Praecursor? Why are you reasonably lean and hard and fit? Why aren't you sitting plump and happy within arm's reach of a dial on your home planet?"

He stared at her. "Why, I . . . there have to be Praecursors!"

"That point is debatable. But I'm asking why you are one."

"I like problems and new places, I suppose," he said hesitantly. "And I have to keep fit because sometimes I run into . . . strenuous situations. But no one forced me to be a Praecursor."

"Exactly," she said.

"I hope you realize that you are not making sense, Thomason."

"Indeed? I thought I was making a great deal of sense. Anyway, you can report that we are not completely lost. One of the Centers is occupied, you know."

"Is it? Good! Which one?"

"Number Six. I'd like to visit it with you. I have a reason, Malloy."

He pressed the stud on his time ring and the correct sun time of the Able XII twenty-hour day came into his mind. He knew that she was standing near enough to him so that she caught it, too, though less strongly. She chuckled, and it was a surprisingly warm sound.

"Why are you laughing?" he asked.

"That toy. See the sun pattern on the floor? From that I could have told you the time within a half hour."

"Not much of a degree of accuracy."

"AGAIN you've missed the point, Malloy. It's accurate enough."

"I can't argue with unreason. Come on. That flier I projected is beyond the clearing where I found you. I'll leave it with you when I go."

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"Thank you. I'd have no use for it. And we should eat before we go."

"We'll eat at the Center."

"Thank you, no. I'll get us something here. First, though, I must bathe."

He looked around the room. "No cleansing unit here."

"There's a perfectly good one in the stream, Malloy." She went to the shelves near the fireplace, selected a tunic of softer fabric than her work clothes, and a heavy towel. "You can make yourself useful, Malloy. Build a small fire in the fireplace. But first come here a moment. That's my garden. See those spiky green things? Pull up about a dozen of them and wash them in the stream."

Before he could decide whether or not to refuse the request, she had gone, walking toward the stream with that long stride of hers, supple and somehow wild. He selected small sticks and tried with infuriating lack of success to start them burning by using a short hot focus of his pocket heat unit. Angry at failing in so simple a task, he walked out and yanked up a dozen of the growths she had indicated. Black moist soil clung to the bulbular white ends that came out of the ground.

He took them to the stream, below the wider part that formed a pool. Remembering the extreme variations in attitudes of modesty on the colonial planets, he did not wish to look directly at her. Praecursors were trained to adapt themselves readily to many odd folkways. But in spite of his intentions he found himself gawking at her as she stood by the pool, tall and tanned and lithe. She smiled down the slope at him as she toweled her shining hair and he made a comparison oddly damaging to the soft pallid women of home.

She belted the short aqua tunic around her slim waist and he followed her back to the house. As he watched her she put some dried moss under the sticks in the fireplace, scratched an object which he recognized as being one of the crude firemaking devices of earliest times. It was called, he remembered, a "match." The small fire blazed. She brought ovoid white objects from the cellar, cracked them into an earthenware dish, chopped the bulbous white growths with a crude knife and stirred them into the mixture. The dish was then suspended over the flame while she sawed off heavy slabs of coarse bread, spread them with a yellow substance.

MALLOY watched closely. This primitive substitute for the extremely simple procedure of operating the synthesizer would form an interesting portion of his report. The odor that filled the room, however, made his salivary glands surprisingly active. The mixture firmed and she took the dish from over

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the fire, divided the contents into two parts, placed one part between two heavy slabs of bread and put it on another dish, set it in front of him.

Malloy took a cautious bite and then a much larger one. The taste was harsher and more concentrated, the texture far coarser than any food he had ever tasted before.

Before he knew it, his share was gone. She washed the dishes in the stream and replaced them on the shelf.

"That was very interesting," he said.

"But nothing you'd care for day in and day out?"

"N-no," he said.

She smiled. "I'm ready, Malloy. Shall we go?"

They walked to the small flier. Malloy watched her closely. She had no awe of it, accepted it as something routine and unimpressive. He ducked under the low door, sat down beside her, lifted the flier off the ground, swung around the crest of a clump of trees.

"Let me see," he said, "six would be . . ."

"Turn it a bit to your right, Malloy. That's enough."

Air whined by as he upped the speed. Cabin heat increased and the cooling unit came on. The ground streamed by far below, flattened by the height.

He said, in a fatherly tone, "This would be a long trip afoot, the way you people seem to travel."

"Several days, Malloy. Through country where pine woods cover the hills, where silvery fish leap high in the lakes, where the trees hold wild honey. At dusk you come to a village. You are always made welcome. Cheese and bread and wine and dancing in the dusk, and the fireflies are like little lanterns."

"Oh," he said distantly.

"But your way is, of course, much quicker," she added.

"I see the Center," he said.

HE BROUGHT the flier around in a long swooping curve and dropped it lightly onto cleared land outside the gates. Even as he got out he saw people walking in the wide pastel streets of the Center. It was like a scene from home. They wore clothes of all shades, hues, fancies, whims. A completely anachronistic shack stood outside the gate, though. A tall young man with a full blond beard sat with his back against the door frame. He grinned and stood up as Malloy and Deen approached. He wore the crude garments of the villagers.

"Thomason, isn't it?" he asked.

"That's right. This is just an inspection trip."

"Go right ahead," he said.

He turned to a metallic plate set beside the rude door, depressed a switch. Malloy, slightly baffled, followed Deen through the gate. As he passed through he felt the momentary tingle of a space-twist fence temporarily reversed.

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Then he straightened his shoulders. He walked beside Thomason. "You see how pleasant life can be in a Center?" he asked proudly.

A well-larded woman sat in the sun playing with two romping fuzzy creatures she had created out of the mental projector. Beyond her a man slept propped against a wall, half-empty bottles surrounding him.

"Very pleasant," Thomason said.

"They all have everything they want. Who would want to live out in the brush when everything is right here, within arm's reach? Exotic foods, toys, amusement."

"Who indeed?" Thomason stressed with gentle irony.

Malloy beamed at the colonists. They had the familiar triple chins of the home planet, the same shortness of breath, the same bland look that comes of satiety in all things. But he was puzzled by the way they stared at the two of them. Dulled eyes, with the glow of resentment almost submerged.

At the end of the street he stopped. "But the rest of the Center is empty!" he said.

"Yes. There's just this one street. We can't go any farther. The fence will stop us."

She turned and started back. He caught her in two quick strides, grasped her arm and pulled her around roughly. "Why have you people installed a twist fence around this street?"

"Because there's no need to put it around a bigger area."

"Why put it around any area?" he shouted into her face.

"You are rude," she said coldly. "And more stupid than I thought. We'll walk back slowly. Look at their faces, Malloy. Look long and well. You see, this is the penal colony for this planet."

The breath whoofed out of him. "Penal? But . . . Wait. Anybody who lives here can have every last thing they want."

"Exactly," she said.

Subdued, he walked beside her and he looked at their faces.

IT WAS dusk in the heart of the village. He heard the thin eager voices of children at play. Smoke from the cook fires lost itself in the grayness overhead where the first strange star patterns were beginning to appear. Deen sat with her back against a tree. Sean Malloy lay stretched out on the grass on his back, the concavity of the nape of his neck fitting comfortably over the warm convexity of her thigh.

An insect lit on the back of his hand and he slapped it. He squirmed a bit. He wasn't yet accustomed to the scratchiness of homespun clothes. He squinted up at the skies and thought of his ship speeding toward Bureau headquarters, the resignation affixed to the automatic controls. This was the third night back at her home.

"A crazy thing to do," he muttered.

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She took her cool fingertips from his forehead abruptly. "Sorry you did it, Sean?" she asked a bit frigidly.

He captured her hand, kissed the palm. "Not the way it sounded. My ship will get back there. They'll give Able XII a double priority. A new Praecursor will be here in probably less than four years. He may send an adjustment team."

The children were being called in from play. A few hundred feet down the unpaved main street came the first tentative sounds of music.

"I wouldn't worry about that, Sean," she said softly.

He sat up, faced her. "Why in Sol not?"

She smiled at him. "Because when he comes, he'll go looking for the person in charge, won't he?"

"Naturally."

"It was decided a long time ago that what little centralized administration we need should be handled by those of us least likely to be hungry for that sort of power."

"I don't get the connection."

"Village representatives to the general meeting are always unmarried girls, and are always those considered to be the most pleasing to the eye. And we are beginning to find that anyone who has become a Praecursor seems peculiarly . . . susceptible to this sort of existence."

HE WAS silent for a long time, and then he laughed. "Poor Zedder," he said.

"And poor Malloy," she added teasingly.

Suddenly he became suspicious. "Did you have orders to—to—"

"Seduce the Praecursor? How strangely short your memory is, my Sean! I seem to remember that the shoe was on the other foot." She stood up quickly and held out her hand. "Come. They will expect us to dance. I shall teach you. It will make you hungry for the wedding feast."

"How barbaric!" muttered the ex-Praecursor as he urgently uptilted her mouth.

"How primitive you're becoming!" she taunted, and writhed out of his arms.

He caught her finally, but only because she let him. He needed some woodchopping and farming, maybe some hunting and hiking, too, before he could outrun her legitimately. A couple of months and she would see who was the stronger.

—JOHN D. MacDONALD

COMING SOON

Results of the spectacular FLYING SAUCER contest!
Don't miss the ingenious solutions!

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BY GROFF CONKLIN

THE pickings are slim this month. Three books, one of them not science fiction and another a minor effort by a major author, make up our quota.

The book which, despite its various faults, stacks up as a worthwhile addition to one's science fiction collection is Stanton A. Coblentz's *After 12,000 Years* (*Fantasy Publishing Co., Inc., 295 pages, $3.00*). It comes as a surprise to find myself enjoying this book, for I have heretofore found Coblentz's tales almost painfully gauche and sententious in style and idea.

It is true that the present opus is no masterpiece of vari-colored writing, and that its romantic elements are handled with all the sensitiveness of the Sweet Singer of Michigan. But if you pass up these defects, you will find it one of the most interesting and believable anti-Utopias of recent decades.

The book was first published, according to the copyright notice, in 1928; in many ways it sounds much older. For example, Coblentz's description of aircraft is more like Jules Verne than what has come since the Wright brothers. Yet the ideas in the book are valid—more

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so today, I believe, than when the book was written. Coblentz conceives of a world in which the class society has been frozen rigid by ruthless selective breeding and genetic manipulation.

By the time the story takes place, 14101 A.D., the people of the world are differentiated into the Political-Financial species or "Wolf Faces"—politicians, dictators, slave-owners, the elite of the society; the Intellectuals, or "Large Heads;" and the "Small Heads," subdivided into Workers and Soldiers. In addition there is a remnant of normal human beings occupying caves on the island of Borneo, defending themselves as best they can against Wolf Face hunting bands.

The peoples of organized society (but not the Borneans) are kept under control by automatic propaganda reminiscent of that in George Orwell's *1984,* and also of the Nazis' own "Big Lie" technique—a remarkable prevision of Hitlerism by Coblentz.

The hero of the story is from our times, and survives 12,000 years as the result of a faulty experiment with suspended animation. He is much like the Borneans in appearance; and, like them, when they are captured, he is enslaved, forced to become a "Keeper of the Insects," a frightful job.

The insects he tends comprise the armies of the empires of the world, Panamica, A-Uria, and Afalia, of which the most aggressive is the "Financial Democracy" of Panamica, by whose soldiery the hero of the story was captured. The armies of insects, bred for enormous size, vicious temper and specialized activity (they include wasps, bees, soldier ants, locusts and such) are tended by Bornean slaves and by Small Head Workers.

After adventures including a jello-like affair with a Bornean girl named Luellen, the hero is transferred to the Panamican army, given a mission to spread termites over A-Uria from an airship, captured by the enemy and set to work as a farmer. However, before anything drastic can happen to him, the whole civilization is wiped out by termites, which turn on their masters and consume every bit of food left in the world—including the starved corpses of the people. All of the world is theirs except for Borneo, to which the hero and his Bornean beloved escape.

Make no mistake—this is not one of science fiction's works of genius. But it is fresh and full of uncomfortable ideas about the future.

THE other science fiction item on our list this month is A. E. van Vogt's *The House That Stood Still (Greenberg: Publisher, 210 pages, $2.50).* This is a potboiler that develops no head of steam—a routine attempt at a detective story of the frenetic "West Coast" school, forced into a science fiction mold by in-

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serting "Immortals" and their never-changing house (built around the spaceship of a prehistoric visitor to Earth) which keeps them immortal.

The story, with its various dreary murders, revolves around the struggles between two factions of the Immortals, one of which wants to quit Earth in the spaceship and go to Mars before Earth's inevitable atomic war blasts them to bits, and the few—including the bee-youtiful heroine—who want to stay and try to stop the war with their superhuman powers.

Allison Stephens, estate agent for the richest of the Immortals, is an Erle Stanley Gardner type of hero. At the end of 7 out of 23 chapters, he is knocked out, held up, or in other ways pushed around the landscape to make him stop interfering.

Of course, he wins out in the end, getting the heroine, fame, gold, immortality in one big, delicious economy package.

The book is readable, no question about it. But in science fiction more is needed, as van Vogt's other works brilliantly show. Ideas, imagination, *scope*—these things, essential in good science fiction, this book has in minimal quantities. I would class it as a rental library property.

THE month's third book is pseudo-historical romance, with a tablespoonful of black magic and diabolism. It is of the same genre as E. R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros,* (which of course surpasses our current item). Even so, Robert E. Howard's *Conan The Conqueror* (*Gnome Press, Inc., 255 pages, $2.75,* originally published under the title *The Hour of the Dragon* in one of the 1935 pulps) is a colorful action story, in many ways a delightful piece of relaxation reading.

Much of the action in the story, which takes place in semi-mythical places and times, concerns the conspiracies of Xaltotun, a sorcerer 3,000 years dead, revived for purposes of the plot by a clique of empire-seekers who use the rediscovered "Heart of Ahriman" as their revivifying instrument. Conan, a king against whom the others conspire, is a believable and full-bodied character; one could wish that Howard had done more with him and less with his villains and black magics.

As a straight creation of the imagination, the world of Conan and his co-players on their swashbuckling stage has real merit. As a piece of writing it is only average, being pretty well laden with bombast. As supernatural literature it is faintly ridiculous.

Nevertheless, for those who like to lean back and read with their minds closed, *Conan* will be highly acceptable and enjoyable.

—GROFF CONKLIN

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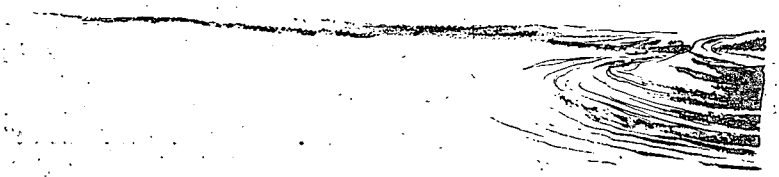
The Reluctant

Pioneers have always resented their wanderlust, hated their hardships. But the future brings a new grudge—when pioneers stay put and scholars do the exploring!



By FRANK M. ROBINSON

THE very young man sat on the edge of the sofa and looked nervous. He carefully studied his fingernails and ran his hands through his hair and picked imaginary lint off the upholstery.

"I have a chance to go with the first research expedition to Venus," he said.

The older man studied the very young man thoughtfully and then leaned over to his humidor and offered him a cigaret. "It's nice to have the new air units now. There was a time when we had to be very careful about things like smoking."

The very young man was annoyed.

"I don't think I want to go," he blurted. "I don't think I would care to spend two years there."

The older man blew a smoke ring and watched it drift toward the air exhaust vent.

"You mean you would miss it here, the people you've known and grown up with, the little familiar things that have made up your life here. You're afraid the glamor would wear off and you would get to hate it on Venus."

The very young man nodded miserably. "I guess that's it."

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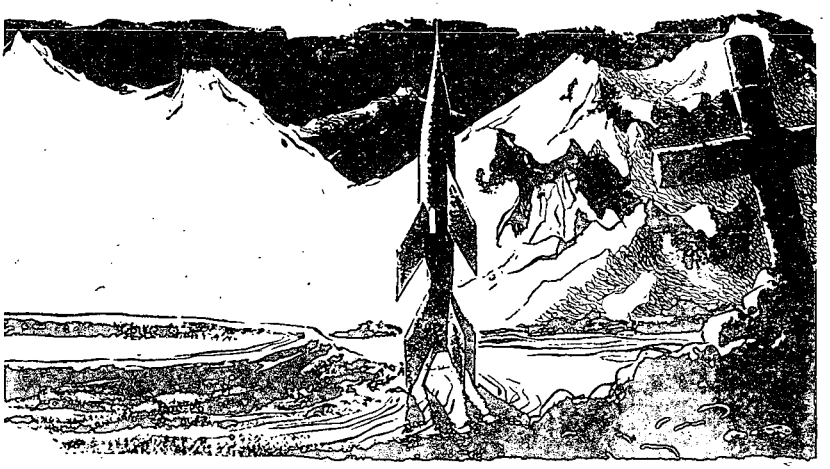
Heroes



Illustrated by DON SIBLEY

"Anything else?"

The very young man found his fingernails extremely fascinating again and finally said, in a low voice, "Yes, there is."

"A girl?"

A nod confirmed this.

It was the older man's turn to look thoughtful. "You know, I'm sure, that psychologists and research men agree that research stations should be staffed by couples. That is, of course, as soon as it's practical."

"But that might be a long time!" the very young man protested.

"It might be—but sometimes it's sooner than you think. And the goal is worth it."

"I suppose so, but—"

The older man smiled. "Still the reluctant heroes," he said, somewhat to himself.

CHAPMAN stared at the radio key.

Three years on the Moon and they didn't want him to come back.

Three years on the Moon and they thought he'd be glad to stay for more. Just raise his salary or give him a bonus, the every-man-has-his-price idea. They probably thought he liked it there.

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Oh, sure, he loved it. Canned coffee, canned beans, canned pills, and canned air until your insides felt as though they were plated with tin. Life in a cramped, smelly little hut where you could take only ten steps in any one direction. Their little scientific home of tomorrow with none of the modern conveniences, a charming place where you couldn't take a shower, couldn't brush your teeth, and your kidneys didn't work right.

And for double his salary they thought he'd be glad to stay for another year and a half. Or maybe three. He should probably be glad he had the opportunity.

The key started to stutter again, demanding an answer.

He tapped out his reply: *"No!"*

There was a silence and then the key stammered once more in a sudden fit of bureaucratic rage. Chapman stuffed a rag under it and ignored it. He turned to the hammocks, strung against the bulkhead on the other side of the room.

The chattering of the key hadn't awakened anybody; they were still asleep, making the animal noises that people usually make in slumber. Dowden, half in the bottom hammock and half on the floor, was snoring peacefully. Dahl, the poor kid who was due for stopover, was mumbling to himself. Julius Klein, with that look of ineffable happiness on his face, looked as if he had just squirmed under the tent to his personal idea of heaven. Donley and Bening were lying perfectly still, their covers not mussed, sleeping very lightly.

Lord, Chapman thought, I'll be happy when I can see some other faces.

"What'd they want?" Klein had one eyelid open and a questioning look on his face.

"They wanted me to stay until the next relief ship lands," Chapman whispered back.

"What did you say?"

He shrugged. "No."

"You kept it short," somebody else whispered. It was Donley, up and sitting on the side of his hammock. "If it had been me, I would have told them just what they could do about it."

THE others were awake now, with the exception of Dahl who had his face to the bulkhead and a pillow over his head.

Dowden rubbed his eyes sleepily. "Sore, aren't you?"

"Kind of. Who wouldn't be?"

"Well, don't let it throw you. They've never been here on the Moon. They don't know what it's like. All they're trying to do is get a good man to stay on the job a while longer."

"*All* they're trying to do," Chapman said sarcastically. "They've got a fat chance."

"They think you've found a home here," Donley said.

"Why the hell don't you guys shut up until morning?" Dahl was

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awake, looking bitter. "Some of us still have to stay here, you know. Some of us aren't going back today."

No, Chapman thought, some of us aren't going back. You aren't. And Dixon's staying, too. Only Dixon isn't ever going back.

Klein jerked his thumb toward Dahl's bunk, held a finger to his lips, and walked noiselessly over to the small electric stove. It was his day for breakfast duty.

The others started lacing up their bunks, getting ready for their last day of work on the Moon. In a few hours they'd be relieved by members of the Third research group and they'd be on their way back to Earth.

And that includes me, Chapman thought. I'm going home. I'm finally going home.

He walked silently to the one small, quartz window in the room. It was morning—the Moon's "morning"—and he shivered slightly. The rays of the Sun were just striking the far rim of the crater and long shadows shot across the crater floor. The rest of it was still blanketed in a dark jumble of powdery pumice and jagged peaks that would make the Black Hills of Dakota look like paradise.

A hundred yards from the research bunker he could make out the small mound of stones and the forlorn homemade cross, jury-rigged out of small condensed milk tins slid over crossed iron bars. You could still see the footprints in the powdery soil where the group had gathered about the grave. It had been more than eighteen months ago, but there was no wind to wear those tracks away. They'd be there forever.

That's what happened to guys like Dixon, Chapman thought. On the Moon, one mistake could use up your whole quota of chances.

Klein came back with the coffee. Chapman took a cup, gagged, and forced himself to swallow the rest of it. It had been in the can for so long you could almost taste the glue on the label.

DONLEY was warming himself over his cup, looking thoughtful. Dowden and Bening were struggling into their suits, getting ready to go outside. Dahl was still sitting on his hammock, trying to ignore them.

"Think we ought to radio the space station and see if they've left there yet?" Klein asked.

"I talked to them on the last call," Chapman said. "The relief ship left there twelve hours ago. They should get here"—he looked at his watch—"in about six and a half hours."

"Chap, you know, I've been thinking," Donley said quietly. "You've been here just twice as long as the rest of us. What's the first thing you're going to do once you get back?"

It hit them, then. Dowden and

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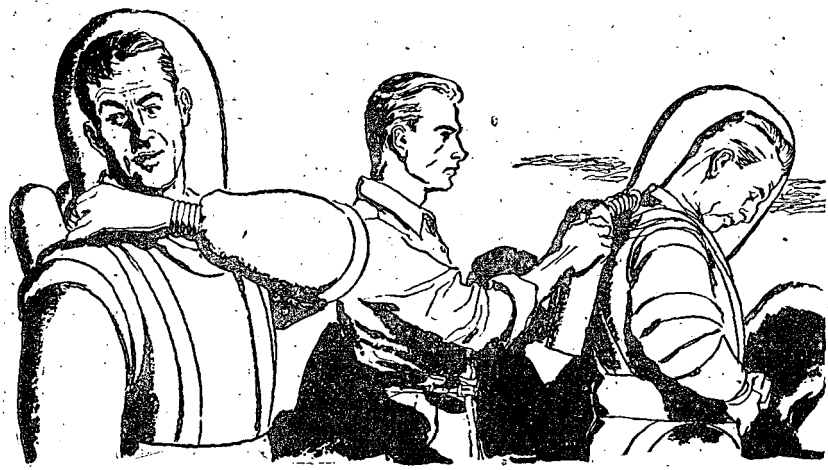

Bening looked blank for a minute and blindly found packing cases to sit on. The top halves of their suits were still hanging on the bulkhead. Klein lowered his coffee cup and looked grave. Even Dahl glanced up expectantly.

"I don't know," Chapman said slowly. "I guess I was trying not to think of that. I suppose none of us have. We've been like little kids who have waited so long for Christmas that they just can't believe it when it's finally Christmas Eve."

Klein nodded in agreement. "I haven't been here three years like you have, but I think I know what you mean." He warmed up to it as the idea sank in. "Just what the hell *are* you going to do?"

"Nothing very spectacular," Chapman said, smiling. "I'm going to rent a room over Times Square, get a recording of a rikky-tik piano, and drink and listen to the music and watch the people on the street below. Then I think I'll see somebody."

"Who's the somebody?" Donley asked.

Chapman grinned. "Oh, just somebody. What are you going to do, Dick?"

"Well, I'm going to do something practical. First of all, I want to turn over all my geological samples to the government. Then I'm going to sell my life story to the movies and then—why, then, I think I'll get drunk!"

Everybody laughed and Chapman turned to Klein.

"How about you, Julius?"

Klein looked solemn. "Like

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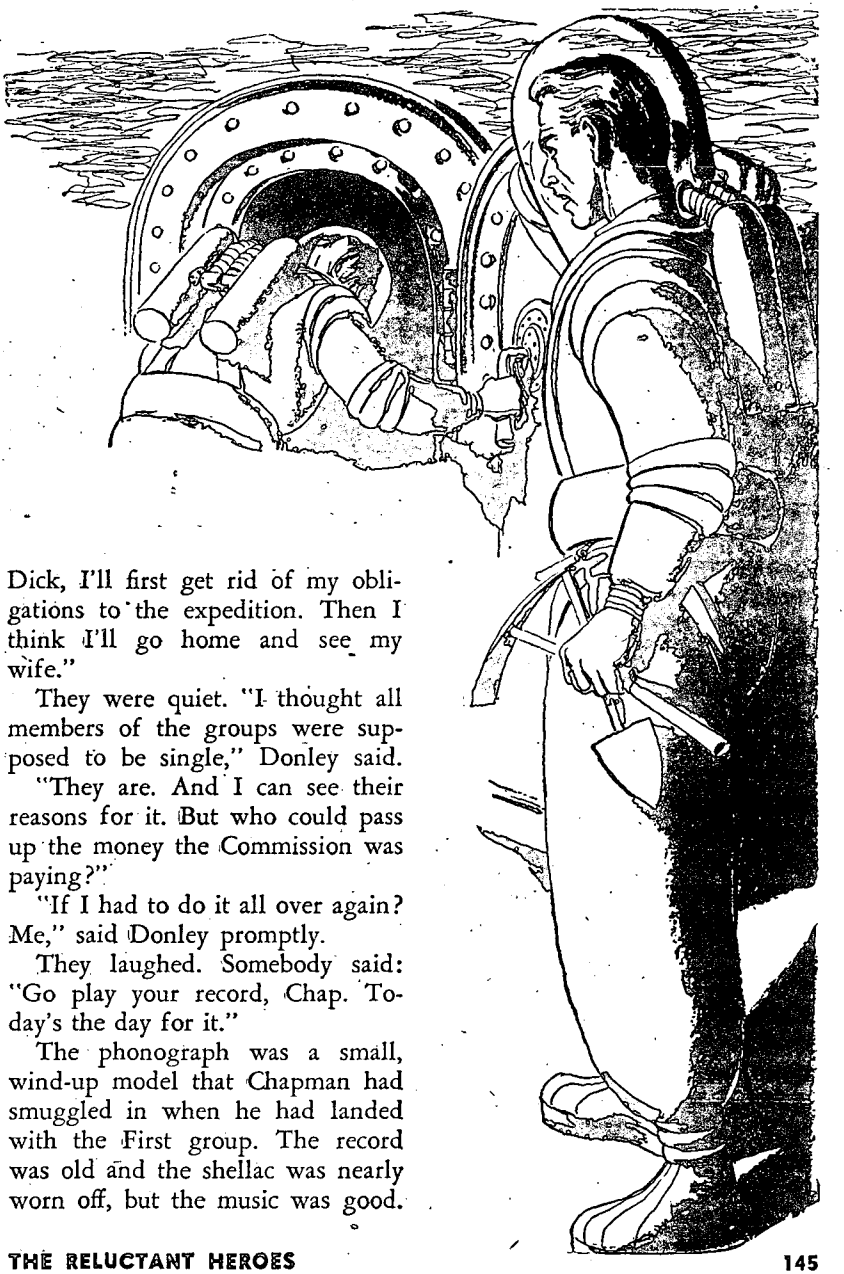

Dick, I'll first get rid of my obligations to the expedition. Then I think I'll go home and see my wife."

They were quiet. "I thought all members of the groups were supposed to be single," Donley said.

"They are. And I can see their reasons for it. But who could pass up the money the Commission was paying?"

"If I had to do it all over again? Me," said Donley promptly.

They laughed. Somebody said: "Go play your record, Chap. Today's the day for it."

The phonograph was a small, wind-up model that Chapman had smuggled in when he had landed with the First group. The record was old and the shellac was nearly worn off, but the music was good.

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The roads are the dustiest,
The winds are the gustiest
The gates are the rustiest,
The pies are the crustiest,
The songs are the lustiest,
The friends the trustiest,
*Way back home.**

THEY ran through it twice.

They were beginning to feel it now, Chapman thought. They were going to go home in a little while and the idea was just starting to sink in.

"You know, Chap," Donley said, "it won't seem like the same old Moon without you on it. Why, we'll look at it when we're out spooning or something and it just won't have the same old appeal."

"Like they say in the army," Bening said, "you never had it so good. You found a home here."

The others chimed in and Chapman grinned. Yesterday or a week ago they couldn't have done it. He had been there too long and he had hated it too much.

The party quieted down after a while and Dowden and Bening finished getting into their suits. They still had a section of the sky to map before they left. Donley was right after them. There was an outcropping of rock that he wanted a sample of and some strata he wished to investigate.

And the time went faster when you kept busy.

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Chapman stopped them at the lock. "Remember to check your suits for leaks," he warned. "And check the valves of your oxygen tanks."

Donley looked sour. "I've gone out at least five hundred times," he said, "and you check me each time."

"And I'd check you five hundred more," Chapman said. "It takes only one mistake. And watch out for blisters under the pumice crust. You go through one of those and that's it, brother."

Donley sighed. "Chap, you watch us like an old mother hen. You see we check our suits, you settle our arguments, you see that we're not bored and that we stay healthy and happy. I think you'd blow our noses for us if we caught cold. But some day, Chap old man, you're gonna find out that your little boys can watch out for themselves!"

But he checked his suit for leaks and tested the valve of his tank before he left.

Only Klein and Chapman were left in the bunker. Klein was at the work table, carefully labeling some lichen specimens.

"I never knew you were married," Chapman said.

Klein didn't look up. "There wasn't much sense in talking about it. You just get to thinking and wanting—and there's nothing you can do about it. You talk about it and it just makes it worse."

"She let you go without any fuss, huh?"

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"No, she didn't make any fuss. But I don't think she liked to see me go, either." He laughed a little. "At least I hope she didn't."

THEY were silent for a while. "What do you miss most, Chap?" Klein asked. "Oh, I know what we said a little while ago, but I mean seriously."

Chapman thought a minute. "I think I miss the sky," he said quietly. "The blue sky and the green grass and trees with leaves on them that turn color in the Fall. I think, when I go back, that I'd like to go out in a rain storm and strip and feel the rain on my skin."

He stopped, feeling embarrassed. Klein's expression was encouraging. "And then I think I'd like to go downtown and just watch the shoppers on the sidewalks. Or maybe go to a burlesque house and smell the cheap perfume and the popcorn and the people sweating in the dark."

He studied his hands. "I think what I miss most is people—all kinds of people. Bad people and good people and fat people and thin people and people I can't understand. People who wouldn't know an atom from an artichoke. And people who wouldn't give a damn. We're a quarter of a million miles from nowhere, Julius, and to make it literary, I think I miss my fellow man more than anything."

"Got a girl back home?" Klein asked almost casually.

"Yes."

"You're not like Dahl. You've never mentioned it."

"Same reason you didn't mention your wife. You get to thinking about it."

Klein flipped the lid on the specimen box. "Going to get married when you get back?"

Chapman was at the port again, staring out at the bleak landscape. "We hope to."

"Settle down in a small cottage and raise lots of little Chapmans, eh?"

Chapman nodded.

"That's the only future," Klein said.

He put away the box and came over to the port. Chapman moved over so they both could look out.

"Chap." Klein hesitated a moment. "What happened to Dixon?"

"He died," Chapman said. "He was a good kid, all wrapped up in science. Being on the Moon was the opportunity of a lifetime. He thought so much about it that he forgot a lot of little things—like how to stay alive. The day before the Second group came, he went out to finish some work he was interested in. He forgot to check for leaks and whether or not the valve on his tank was all the way closed. We couldn't get to him in time."

"He had his walkie-talkie with him?"

"Yes. It worked fine, too. We heard everything that went through his mind at the end."

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Klein's face was blank. "What's your real job here, Chap? Why does somebody have to stay for stopover?"

"Hell, lots of reasons, Julius. You can't get a whole relief crew and let them take over cold. They have to know where you left off. They have to know where things are, how things work, what to watch out for. And then, because you've been here a year and a half and know the ropes, you have to watch them to see that they stay alive in spite of themselves. The Moon's a new environment and you have to learn how to live in it. There's a lot of things to learn—and some people just never learn."

"You're nursemaid, then."

"I suppose you could call it that."

KLEIN said, "You're not a scientist, are you?"

"No, you should know that. I came as the pilot of the first ship. We made the bunker out of parts of the ship so there wasn't anything to go back on. I'm a good mechanic and I made myself useful with the machinery. When it occurred to us that somebody was going to have to stay over, I volunteered. I thought the others were so important that it was better they should take their samples and data back to Earth when the first relief ship came."

"You wouldn't do it again, though, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Do you think Dahl will do as good a job as you've done here?"

Chapman frowned. "Frankly, I hadn't thought of that. I don't believe I care. I've put in my time; it's somebody else's turn now. He volunteered for it. I think I was fair in explaining all about the job when you talked it over among yourselves."

"You did, but I don't think Dahl's the man for it. He's too young, too much of a kid. He volunteered because he thought it made him look like a hero. He doesn't have the judgment that an older man would have. That you have."

Chapman turned slowly around and faced Klein.

"I'm not the indispensable man," he said slowly, "and even if I was, it wouldn't make any difference to me. I'm sorry if Dahl is young. So was I. I've lost three years up here. And I don't intend to lose any more."

Klein held up his hands. "Look, Chap, I didn't mean you should stay. I know how much you hate it and the time you put in up here. It's just—" His voice trailed away. "It's just that I think it's such a damn important job."

Klein had gone out in a last search for rock lichens and Chapman enjoyed one of his relatively few moments of privacy. He wandered over to his bunk and opened his barracks bag. He checked the

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underwear and his toothbrush and shaving kit for maybe the hundredth time and pushed the clothing down farther in the canvas. It was foolish because the bag was already packed and had been for a week. He remembered stalling it off for as long as he could and then the quiet satisfaction about a week before, when he had opened his small gear locker and transferred its meager belongings to the bag.

He hadn't actually needed to pack, of course. In less than twenty-four hours he'd be back on Earth where he could drown himself in toothpaste and buy more tee shirts than he could wear in a lifetime. He could leave behind his shorts and socks and the outsize shirts he had inherited from—who was it? Driesbach?—of the First group. Dahl could probably use them or maybe one of the boys in the Third.

BUT it wasn't like going home unless you packed. It was part of the ritual, like marking off the last three weeks in pencil on the gray steel of the bulkhead beside his hammock. Just a few hours ago, when he woke up, he had made the last check mark and signed his name and the date. His signature was right beneath Dixon's.

He frowned when he thought of Dixon and slid back the catch on the top of the bag and locked it. They should never have sent a kid like Dixon to the Moon.

He had just locked the bag when he heard the rumble of the airlock and the soft hiss of air. Somebody had come back earlier than expected. He watched the inner door swing open and the spacesuited figure clump in and unscrew its helmet.

Dahl. He had gone out to help Dowden on the Schmidt telescope. Maybe Dowden hadn't needed any help, with Bening along. Or more likely, considering the circumstances, Dahl wasn't much good at helping anybody today.

Dahl stripped off his suit. His face was covered with light beads of sweat and his eyes were frightened.

He moistened his lips slightly. "Do—do you think they'll ever have relief ships up here more often than every eighteen months, Chap? I mean, considering the advance of—"

"No," Chapman interrupted bluntly. "I don't. Not at least for ten years. The fuel's too expensive and the trip's too hazardous. On freight charges alone you're worth your weight in platinum when they send you here. Even if it becomes cheaper, Bob, it won't come about so it will shorten stopover right away." He stopped, feeling a little sorry for Dahl. "It won't be too bad. There'll be new men up here and you'll pass a lot of time getting to know them."

"Well, you see," Dahl started, "that's why I came back early. I wanted to see you about stopover.

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It's that—well, I'll put it this way." He seemed to be groping for an easy way to say what he wanted to. "I'm engaged back home. Really nice girl, Chap, you'd like her if you knew her." He fumbled in his pocket and found a photograph and put it on the desk. "That's a picture of Alice, taken at a picnic we were on together." Chapman didn't look. "She—we—expected to be married when I got back. I never told her about stopover, Chap. She thinks I'll be home tomorrow. I kept thinking, hoping, that maybe somehow—"

He was fumbling it badly, Chapman thought.

"You wanted to trade places with me, didn't you, Bob? You thought I might stay for stopover again, in your place?"

It hurt to look in Dahl's eyes. They were the eyes of a man who was trying desperately to stop what he was about to do, but just couldn't help himself.

"Well, yes, more or less. Oh, God, Chap, I know you want to go home! But I couldn't ask any of the others; you were the only one who could, the only one who was qualified!"

DAHL looked as though he was going to be sick. Chapman tried to recall all he knew about him. Dahl, Robert. Good mathematician. Graduate from one of the Ivy League schools. Father was a manufacturer of stoves or something.

It still didn't add, not quite. "You know I don't like it here any more than you do," Chapman said slowly. "I may have commitments at home, too. What made you think I would change my mind?"

Dahl took the plunge. "Well, you see," he started eagerly, too far gone to remember such a thing as pride, "you know my father's pretty well fixed. We would make it worth your while, Chap." He was

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feverish. "It would mean eighteen more months, Chap, but they'd be well-paid months!"

Chapman felt tired. The good feeling he had about going home was slowly evaporating.

"If you have any report to make, I think you had better get at it," he cut in, keeping all the harshness he felt out of his voice. "It'll be too late after the relief ship leaves. It'll be easier to give the captain your report than try to radio it back to Earth from here."

He felt sorrier for Dahl than he could ever remember having felt for anybody. Long after going home, Dahl would remember this. It would eat at him like a cancer.

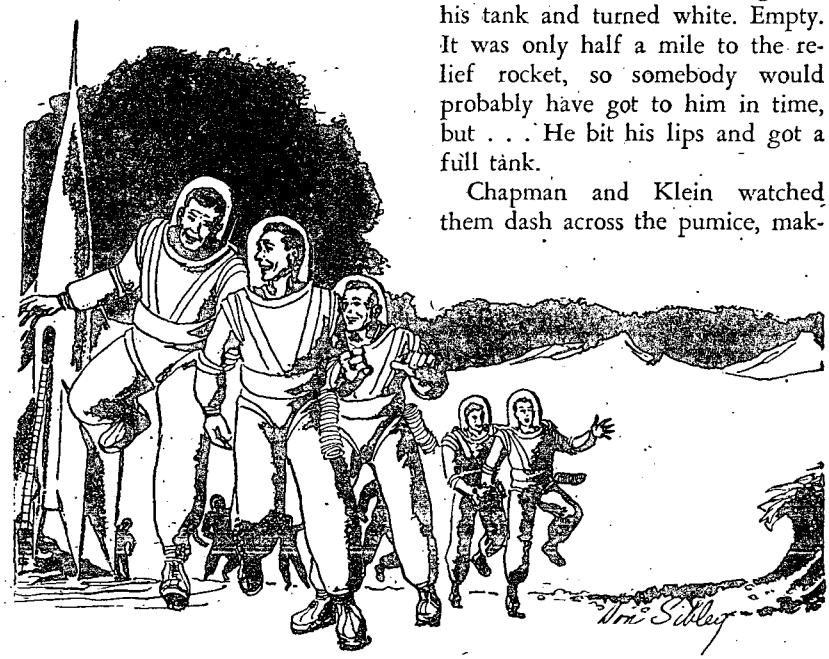
Cowardice is the one thing for which no man ever forgives himself.

DONLEY was eating a sandwich and looking out the port, so, naturally, he saw the ship first. "Well, whaddya know!" he shouted. "We got company!" He dashed for his suit. Dowden and Bening piled after him and all three started for the lock.

Chapman was standing in front of it. "Check your suits," he said softly. "Just be sure to check."

"Oh, what the hell, Chap!" Donley started angrily. Then he shut up and went over his suit. He got to his tank and turned white. Empty. It was only half a mile to the relief rocket, so somebody would probably have got to him in time, but . . . He bit his lips and got a full tank.

Chapman and Klein watched them dash across the pumice, mak-



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ing the tremendous leaps they used to read about in the Sunday supplements. The port of the rocket had opened and tiny figures were climbing down the ladder. The small figures from the bunker reached them and did a short jig of welcome. Then the figures linked arms and started back. Chapman noticed one—it was probably Donley—pat the ship affectionately before he started back.

They were in the lock and the air pumped in and then they were in the bunker, taking off their suits. The newcomers were impressed and solemn, very much aware of the tremendous responsibility that rested on their shoulders. Like Donley and Klein and the members of the Second group had been when they had landed. Like Chapman had been in the First.

Donley and the others were all over them.

HOW was it back on Earth? Who had won the series? Was so-and-so still teaching at the university? What was the international situation?

Was the sky still blue, was the grass still green, did the leaves still turn color in the autumn, did people still love and cry and were there still people who didn't know what an atom was and didn't give a damn?

Chapman had gone through it all before. But was Ginny still Ginny?

Some of the men in the Third had their luggage with them. One of them—a husky, red-faced kid named Williams—was opening a box about a foot square and six inches deep. Chapman watched him curiously.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Klein said. "Hey, guys, look what we've got here!"

Chapman and the others crowded around and suddenly Donley leaned over and took a deep breath. In the box, covering a thick layer of ordinary dirt, was a plot of grass. They looked at it, awed. Klein put out his hand and laid it on top of the grass.

"I like the feel of it," he said simply.

Chapman cut off a single blade with his fingernail and put it between his lips. It had been years since he had seen grass and had the luxury of walking on it and lying on its cool thickness during those sultry summer nights when it was too hot to sleep indoors.

Williams blushed. "I thought we could spare a little water for it and maybe use the ultraviolet lamp on it some of the time. Couldn't help but bring it along; it seemed sort of like a symbol . . ." He looked embarrassed.

Chapman sympathized. If he had had any sense, he'd have tried to smuggle something like that up to the Moon instead of his phonograph.

"That's valuable grass," Dahl

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said sharply. "Do you realize that at current freight rates up here, it's worth about ten dollars a blade?"

Williams looked stricken and somebody said, "Oh, shut up, Dahl."

One of the men separated from the group and came over to Chapman. He held out his hand and said, "My name's Eberlein. Captain of the relief ship. I understand you're in charge here?"

Chapman nodded and shook hands. They hadn't had a captain on the First ship. Just a pilot and crew. Eberlein looked every inch a captain, too. Craggy face, gray hair, the firm chin of a man who was sure of himself.

"You might say I'm in charge here," Chapman said.

"Well, look, Mr. Chapman, is there any place where we can talk together privately?"

They walked over to one corner of the bunker. "This is about as private as we can get, captain," Chapman said. "What's on your mind?"

EBERLEIN found a packing crate and made himself comfortable. He looked at Chapman.

"I've always wanted to meet the man who's spent more time here than anybody else," he began.

"I'm sure you wanted to see me for more reasons than just curiosity."

Eberlein took out a pack of cigarets. "Mind if I smoke?"

Chapman jerked a thumb toward Dahl. "Ask him. He's in charge now."

The captain didn't bother. He put the pack away. "You know we have big plans for the station," he said.

"I hadn't heard of them."

"Oh, yes, *big plans*. They're working on unmanned, open-side rockets now that could carry cargo and sheet steel for more bunkers like this. Enable us to enlarge the unit, have a series of bunkers all linked together. Make good laboratories and living quarters for you people." His eyes swept the room. "Have a little privacy for a change."

Chapman nodded. "They could use a little privacy up here."

The captain noticed the pronoun. "Well, that's one of the reasons why I wanted to talk to you, Chapman. The Commission talked it over and they'd like to see you stay. They feel if they're going to enlarge it, add more bunkers and have more men up here, that a man of practical experience should be running things. They figure that you're the only man who's capable and who's had the experience."

The captain vaguely felt the approach was all wrong.

"Is that all?"

Eberlein was ill at ease. "Naturally you'd be paid well. I don't imagine any man would like being here all the time. They're prepared to double your salary—maybe even a bonus in addition—and let you

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have full charge. You'd be Director of the Luna Laboratories."

All this and a title too, Chapman thought.

"That's it?" Chapman asked.

Eberlein frowned. "Well, the Commission said they'd be willing to consider anything else you had in mind, if it was more money or . . ."

"The answer is no," Chapman said. "I'm not interested in more money for staying because I'm not interested in staying. Money can't buy it, captain. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that you'd have to stay up here to appreciate that.

"Bob Dahl is staying for stopover. If there's something important about the project or impending changes, perhaps you'd better tell him before you go."

He walked away.

CHAPMAN held the letter in both hands, but the paper still shook. The others had left the bunker, the men of the Second taking those of the Third in hand to show them the machinery and apparatus that was outside, point out the deadly blisters underneath the pumice covering, and show them how to keep out of the Sun and how to watch their air supply.

He was glad he was alone. He felt something trickle down his face and tasted salt on his lips.

The mail had been distributed and he had saved his latest letter until the others had left so he could read it in privacy. It was a short letter, very short.

It started: "Dear Joel: This isn't going to be a nice letter, but I thought it best that you should know before you came home."

There was more to it, but he hadn't even needed to read it to know what it said. It wasn't original, of course. Women who change their minds weren't exactly an innovation, either.

He crumpled the paper and held a match to it and watched it burn on the steel floor.

Three years had been a long time. It was too long a time to keep loving a man who was a quarter of a million miles away. She could look up in the night sky when she was out with somebody else now and tell him how she had once been engaged to the Man in the Moon.

It would make good conversation. It would be funny. A joke.

He got up and walked over to his phonograph and put the record on. The somewhat scratchy voice sang as if nothing had happened.

The home food's the spreadiest,
The old wine's the headiest,
The old pals the readiest,
The home gal's the steadiest,
The love the liveliest,
The life the loveliest,
Way back home.

The record caught and started repeating the last line.

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He hadn't actually wanted to play it. It had been an automatic response. He had played it lots of times before when he had thought of Earth. Of going home.

He crossed over and threw the record across the bunker and watched it shatter on the steel wall and the pieces fall to the floor.

The others came back in the bunker and the men of the Second started grabbing their bags and few belongings and getting ready to leave. Dahl sat in a corner, a peculiar expression on his face. He looked as if he wanted to cry and yet still felt that the occasion was one for rejoicing.

Chapman walked over to him. "Get your stuff and leave with the others, Dahl." His voice was quiet and hard.

Dahl looked up, opened his mouth to say something, and then shut up. Donley and Bening and Dowden were already in the airlock, ready to leave. Klein caught the conversation and came over. He gripped Chapman's arm.

"What the hell's going on, Chap? Get your bag and let's go. I know just the bistro to throw a whing-ding when we get—"

"I'm not going back," Chapman said.

Klein looked annoyed, not believing him. "Come on, what's the matter with you? You suddenly decide you don't like the blue sky and trees and stuff? Let's go!"

The men in the lock were looking at them questioningly. Some members of the Third looked embarrassed, like outsiders caught in a family argument.

"Look, Julius, I'm not going back," Chapman repeated dully. "I haven't anything to go back for."

"You're doing a much braver thing than you may think," a voice cut in. It belonged to Eberlein.

Chapman looked at him. Eberlein flushed, then turned and walked stiffly to the lock to join the others.

Just before the inner door of the lock shut, they could hear Chapman, his hands on his hips, breaking in the Third on how to be happy and stay healthy on the Moon. His voice was ragged and strained and sounded like a top-sergeant's.

DAHL and Eberlein stood in the outer port of the relief ship, staring back at the research bunker. It was half hidden in the shadows of a rocky overhang that protected it from meteorites.

"They kidded him a lot this morning," Dahl said. "They said he had found a home on the Moon."

"If we had stayed an hour or so more, he might have changed his mind and left, after all," Eberlein mused, his face a thoughtful mask behind his air helmet.

"I offered him money," Dahl said painfully. "I was a coward and I offered him money to stay in my

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place." His face was bitter and full of disgust for himself.

Eberlein turned to him quickly and automatically told him the right thing.

"We're all cowards once in a while," he said earnestly. "But your offer of money had nothing to do with his staying. He stayed because he had to stay, because we made him stay."

"I don't understand," Dahl said.

"Chapman had a lot to go home for. He was engaged to be married." Dahl winced. "We got her to write him a letter breaking it off. We knew it meant that he lost one of his main reasons for wanting to go back. I think, perhaps, that he still would have left if we had stayed and argued him into going. But we left before he could change his mind."

"That—was a lousy thing to do!"

"We had no choice. We didn't use it except as a last resort."

"I don't know of any girl who would have done such a thing, no matter what your reasons, if she was in love with a guy like Chapman," Dahl said.

"There was only one who would have," Eberlein agreed. "Ginny Dixon. She understood what we were trying to tell her. She had to; her brother had died up here."

"Why was Chapman so important?" Dahl burst out. "What could he have done that I couldn't have done—would have done if I had had any guts?"

"Perhaps you could have," Eberlein said. "But I doubt it. I don't think there were many men who could have. And we couldn't take the chance. Chapman knows how to live on the Moon. He's like a trapper who's spent all his time in the forests and knows it like the palm of his hand. He never makes mistakes, he never fails to check things. And he isn't a scientist. He would never become so preoccupied with research that he'd fail to make checks. And he can watch out for those who do make mistakes. Ginny understood that all too well."

"How did you know all this about Chapman?" Dahl asked.

"The men in the First told us some of it. And we had our own observer with you here. Bening kept us pretty well informed."

EBERLEIN stared at the bunker thoughtfully.

"It costs a lot of money to send ships up here and establish a colony. It will cost a lot to expand it. And with that kind of investment, you don't take chances. You have to have the best men for the job. You get them even if they don't want to do it."

He gestured at the small, blotchy globe of blue and green that was the Earth, riding high in the black sky.

"You remember what it was like five years ago, Dahl? Nations at each other's throats, re-arming to the teeth? It isn't that way now.

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We've got the one lead that nobody can duplicate or catch up on. Nobody has our technical background. I know, this isn't a military base. But it could become one."

He paused.

"But these aren't even the most important reasons, Dahl. We're at the beginnings of space travel, the first bare, feeble start. If this base on the Moon succeeds, the whole human race will be Outward Bound." He waved at the stars. "You have your choice—a frontier that lies in the stars, or a psychotic little world that tries and fails and spends its time and talents trying to find better methods of suicide.

"With a choice like that, Dahl, you can't let it fail. And personal lives and viewpoints are expendable. But it's got to be that way. There's too much at stake."

Eberlein hesitated a moment and when he started again, it was on a different track. "You're an odd bunch of guys, you and the others in the groups, Dahl. Damn few of you come up for the glamor, I know. None of you like it and none of you are really enthusiastic about it. You were all reluctant to come in the first place, for the most part. You're a bunch of pretty reluctant heroes, Dahl."

The captain nodded soberly at the bunker. "I, personally, don't feel happy about that. I don't like having to mess up other people's lives. I hope I won't have to again. Maybe somehow, someway, this one can be patched up. We'll try to."

He started the mechanism that closed the port of the rocket. His face was a study of regret and helplessness. He was thinking of a future that, despite what he had told Dahl, wasn't quite real to him.

"I feel like a cheap son of a bitch," Eberlein said.

THE very young man said, "Do they actually care where they send us? Do they actually care what we think?"

The older man got up and walked to the window. The bunkers and towers and squat buildings of the research colony glinted in the sunlight. The colony had come a long way; it housed several thousands now.

The Sun was just rising for the long morning and farther down shadows stabbed across the crater floor. Tycho was by far the most beautiful of the craters, he thought.

It was nice to know that the very young man was going to miss it. It had taken the older man quite a long time to get to like it. But that was to be expected—he hadn't been on the Moon.

"I would say so," he said. "They were cruel, that way, at the start. But then they had to be. The goal was too important. And they made up for it as soon as they could. It didn't take them too long to remember the men who had traded their future for the stars."

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The very young man said, "Did you actually think of it that way when you first came up here?"

The older man thought for a minute. "No," he admitted. "No, we didn't. Most of us were strictly play-for-pay men. The Commission wanted men who wouldn't fall apart when the glamor wore off and there was nothing left but privation and hard work and loneliness. The men who fell for the glamor were all right for quick trips, but not for an eighteen-month stay in a research bunker. So the Commission offered high salaries and we reluctantly took the jobs.

. "Oh, there was the idea behind the project, the vision the Commission had in mind. But it took a while for that to grow."

A woman came in the room just then, bearing a tray with glasses on it. The older man took one and said, "Your mother and I were notified yesterday that you had been chosen to go. We would like to see you go, but of course the final decision is up to you."

He sipped his drink and turned to his wife: "It has its privations, but in the long run we've never regretted it, have we, Ginny?"

—FRANK M. ROBINSON

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